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MEDIA IMAGES, AND REDEFINING 'BEAUTY'

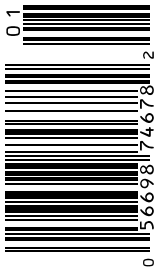
by Maika Llaneza



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Vol. 49 No. 1

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BY WALTER
BRUEGGEMANN**
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DOWN THE
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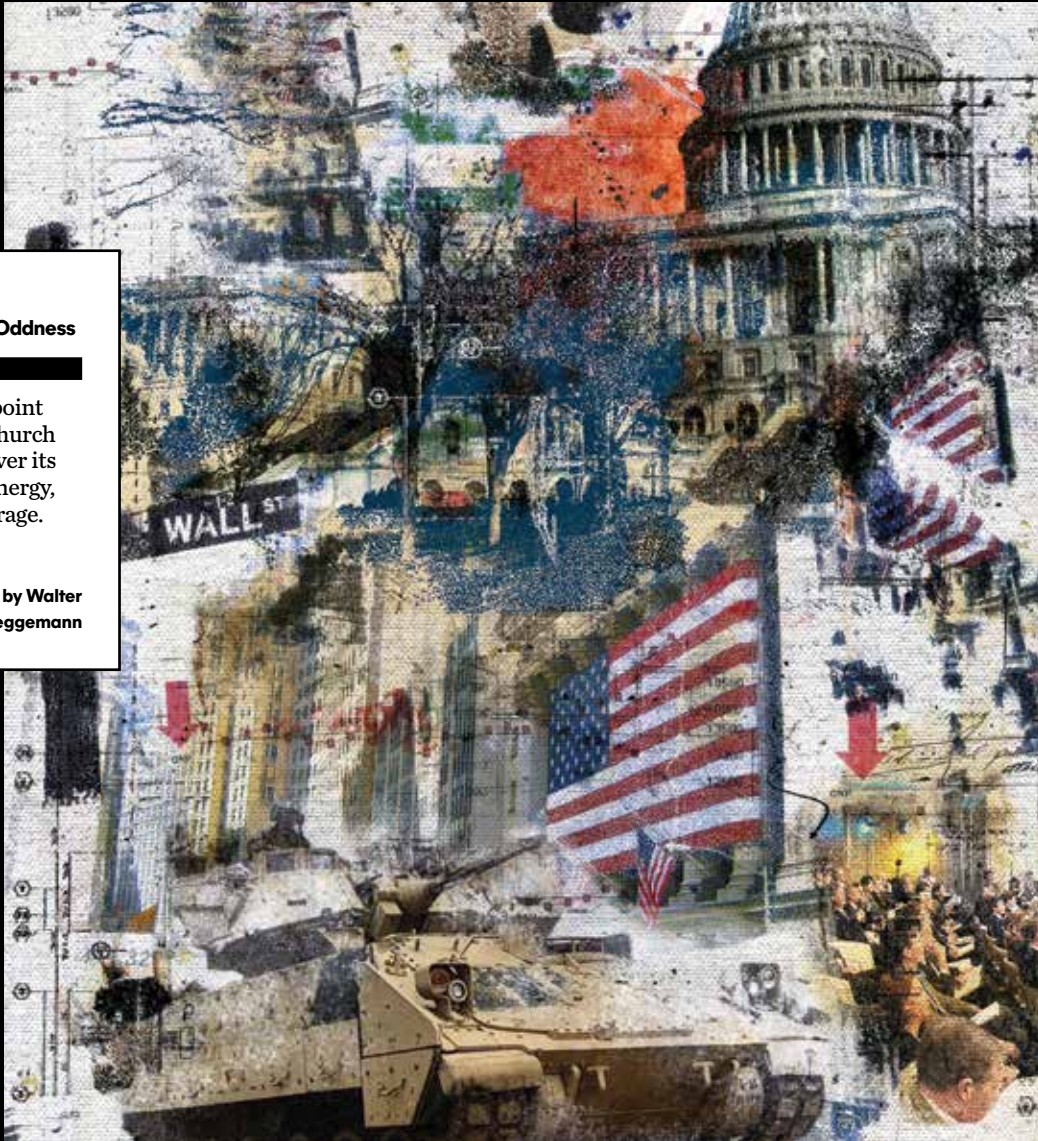
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“PROPHETS SPEAK IN LANGUAGE THAT IS POROUS AND ELUSIVE AND SLIPPERY.”

Called to a Dangerous Oddness

We're at a point
when the church
has to recover its
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UNION

From the Editor

Oil pipelines leak. This fall, the Keystone Pipeline spilled almost 400,000 gallons of tar sands oil—an especially dirty fossil fuel—in its second large-scale leak in two years. The pipeline’s owner, TC Energy (née TransCanada), wants to build the Keystone XL extension despite the environmental threats.

But leaks aren’t the reason that oil pipelines are problematic. To expand the use of fossil fuels in the context of the climate crisis that has begun to destroy our planet is an immoral and even criminal act. That’s why actions such as those of the so-called “valve turners” (page 32) are not only justified but a necessary alarm clock for a still-somnolent public.

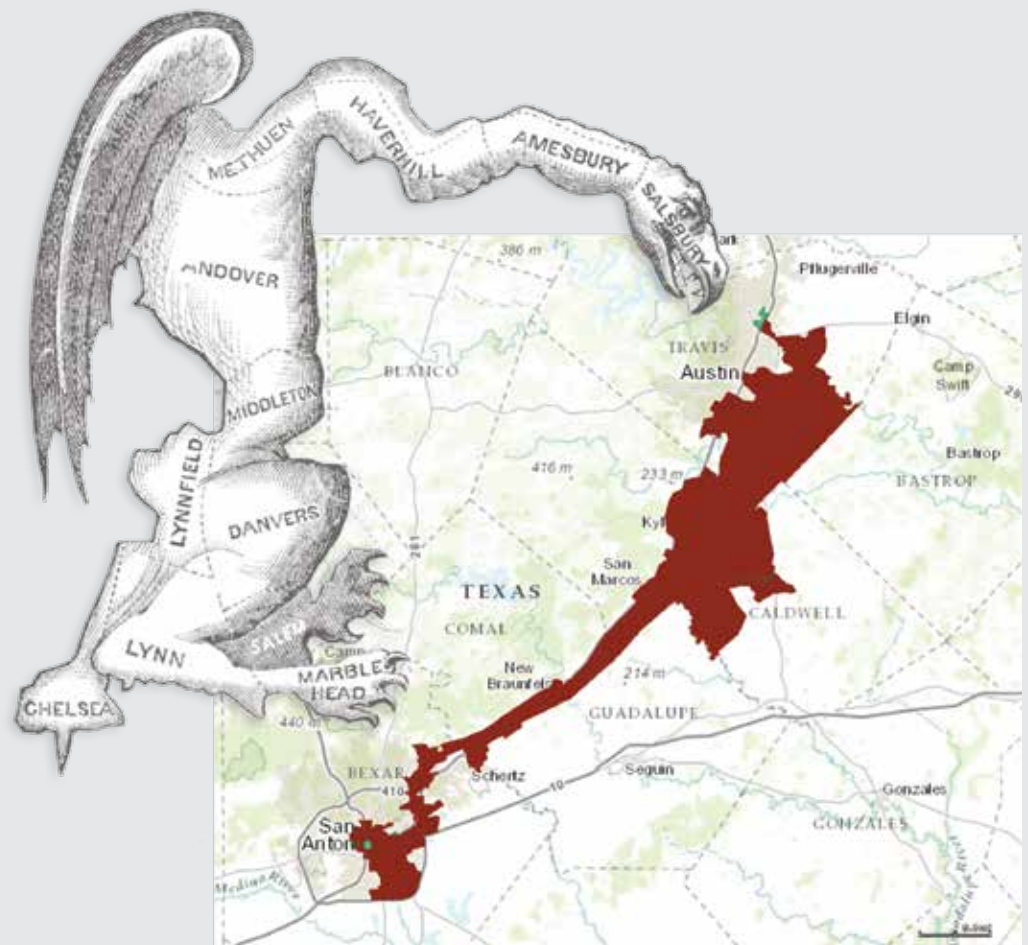
Finally, thank you to all who have commented on the redesign we launched last summer. Since then, we’ve continued to make small changes, and we hope they’ve improved readability. As always, we’re thankful for the high level of reader engagement and welcome your ongoing feedback.

RESPONSE

Thumbs Down

In “Looking Backward” (November 2019), Allyson McKinney Timm critiqued the Trump administration for prioritizing national interests over human rights and urged Christians to hold our leaders accountable. Readers agreed: “It’s hard to choose an emoji to fit my feelings,” wrote Karen T. Morgan 🐉. “This administration is doing and promoting the exact crimes that the USA had charged several countries of doing in the past.” “The United States has never been ... perfect but most of us have been striving to treat our fellow humans the way we would want to be treated,” wrote Judy Lampe Shelly 🐉. “For this administration to attempt to change this is perhaps the most destructive violation of who we are as a country so far!”

Write us: response@sojo.net



"IT IS THE
OBLIGATION
OF EVERY
PERSON BORN
IN A SAFER
ROOM TO OPEN
THE DOOR
WHEN SOMEONE
IN DANGER
KNOCKS."

Dina Nayeri

author, *The Ungrateful Refugee*

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Maika Llaneza

For 15 years, Filipina-American writer Maika Llaneza has worked with students who have disabilities, a job that's taught her empathy and "not to take things personally." She also studies theology, a discipline that's propelled her on a "journey toward self-love, cultural pride, and decolonization" (p. 22). As both teacher and student, "I want to help empower myself and others as far as learning about our culture, taking pride in our culture, not allowing others to make certain cultures inferior," she says.



M. Daniel Carroll R.

Teaching in Guatemala during the nation's civil war forever changed how M. Daniel Carroll R. interprets the Bible (p. 48): "You're asking questions about war, poverty, and politics and the Old Testament comes alive," says Carroll, noting that both Guatemala and ancient Israel were agrarian societies facing war and social inequity. Carroll is a scholar of Old Testament social ethics and author of several books, including *The Bible and Borders: Hearing God's Word on Immigration* (May 2020).

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Average percentage of additional time women perceived to be darker skinned spend in prison compared with lighter-skinned counterparts.

55

Percentage of Latinos with darker skin who say people have acted as if they were not smart.

59

Percentage of U.S. adults who say being white helps people's ability to get ahead.

OUR MISSION

The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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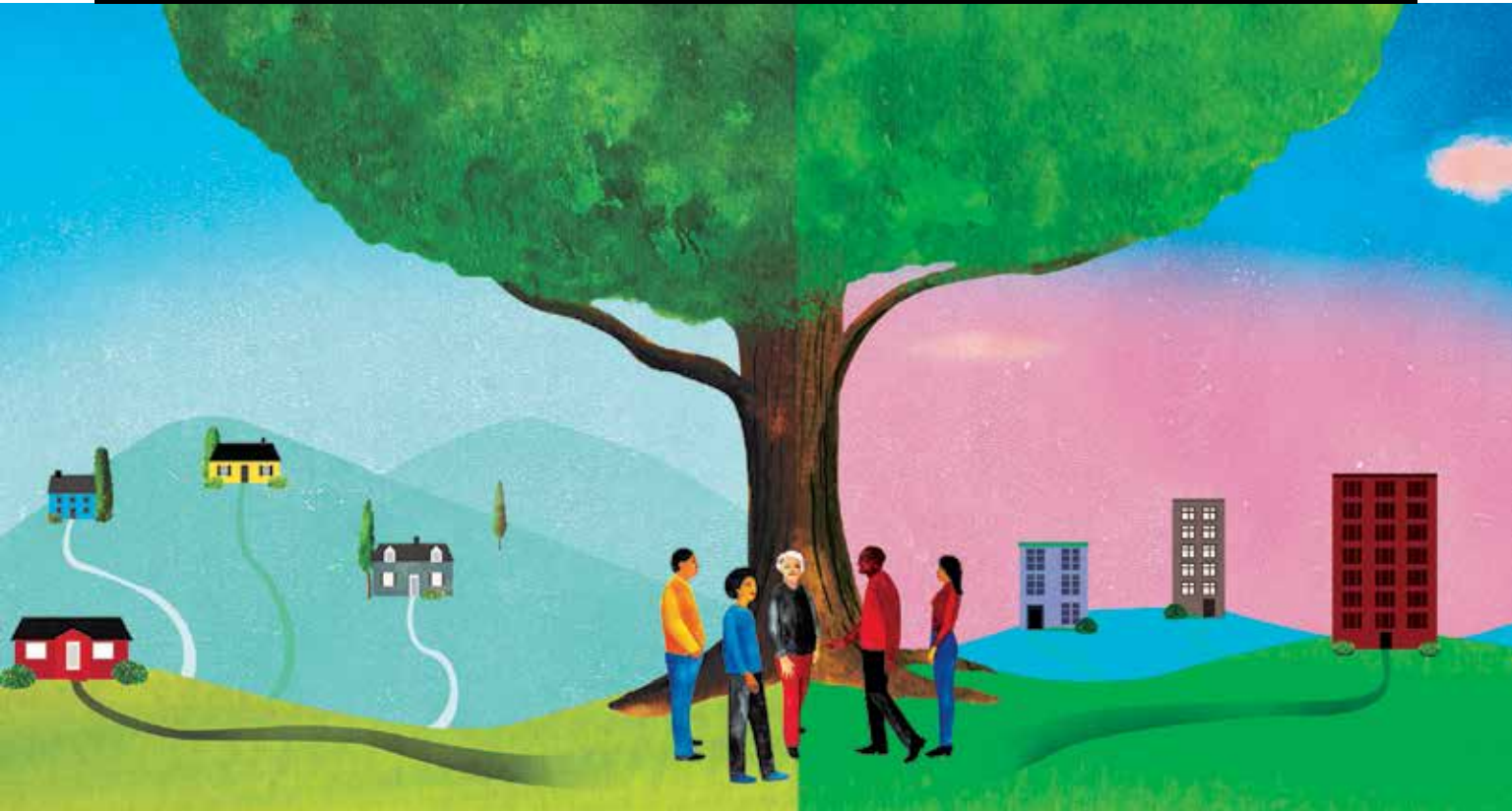
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1

MOBILIZING HOPE

BY ADAM RUSSELL TAYLOR

THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

This summer, while working on a forthcoming book, I spent a great deal of time thinking, praying, and wrestling with identifying a moral vision and narrative that would be capable of uniting our country and counteracting its perilous levels of polarization. When I look back over American history, “the beloved community” stands out as perhaps the most hopeful and transformational moral vision, one that I believe can be recast and reimagined to unite most Americans around a bigger story of us. The beloved community combines civic ideals with deep spiritual and religious values—that’s why it’s a vision that can resonate across religions and with those who check “none of the above” on religious-identification surveys.

“IT IS THIS TYPE OF SPIRIT AND THIS TYPE OF LOVE THAT CAN TRANSFORM OPPONENTS INTO FRIENDS.”

“IT STARTS WITH AN UNDERSTANDING THAT WE ARE BELOVED BY GOD.”

The term was coined in the early days of the 20th century by the philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce. However, it was Martin Luther King Jr., as well as other leaders in the civil rights struggle, who popularized the term. Dr. King spoke about the beloved community in a 1956 speech he gave at a rally following the Supreme Court decision desegregating buses in Montgomery, Ala. King said, “the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of [people].”

In contemporary terms, the key to realizing the “beloved community” is to build a nation in which

neither punishment nor privilege is attached to one’s race, skin color, nationality, gender identity, sexual orientation, or any other human difference. While this represents a very high bar, it must become a barometer by which we measure political leadership and every piece of public policy. In other words, not only would every person, all of whom are made in the image of God, be equally valued and respected, their inherent value and dignity would be affirmed.

“Beloved” signifies what we most value, love, and cherish. From a spiritual and religious perspective, beloved starts with an understanding and belief that we are beloved by God, that God knows everything about us—all of our vices, our shortcomings, and our contradictions—and still loves us anyway.

Beloved is also rooted in mutual regard and mutual concern. Beloved requires a commitment to empathy, which has been glaringly deficient in our body politic. Combining these, a beloved community is one in which radically inclusive love is operative and the norm. It is a community in which we are constantly seeking to build and restore right relationships. In beloved community the needs of the most vulnerable are recognized and prioritized, because the moral test of our society is how the most vulnerable people are faring, particularly children, the stranger, and the marginalized. I hope this vision resonates, and I can’t wait to share more about how we can practically and courageously work together to achieve it. ✦



Adam Russell Taylor is executive director of Sojourners.

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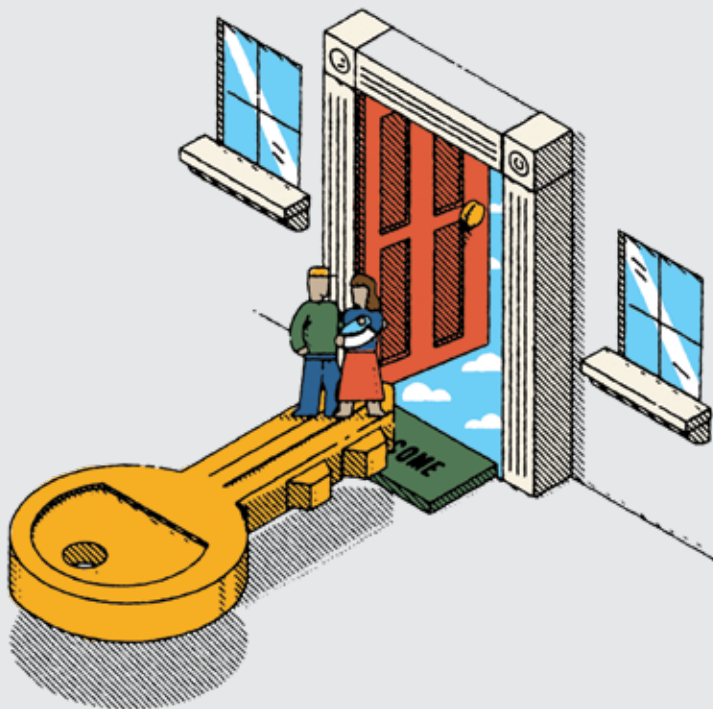
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GIVING A STRANGER YOUR HOUSE KEY

Many asylum seekers remain in detention because they don't have an official U.S. sponsor.



2

In the past three years, the Trump administration has upended decades of legal precedent that created a humane legal process for asylum seekers to enter the U.S. and build a life for themselves while they wait to plead their case in front of an immigration judge.

Asylum is a protection available to foreign nationals already in the United States or at the U.S. border who meet the international law definition of a “refugee.” A refugee is a person who can’t go home because of “past persecution or a well-founded fear of being persecuted in the future” due to their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, according to the United Nations.

On the U.S. Southern border, these are people fleeing organized violence and government repression. Under Trump administration “third-country” agreements, the U.S. will now be deporting many asylum seekers back to

the same countries that they are fleeing.

While this scenario is exactly what Trump's lead immigration policy adviser, Stephen Miller, has always dreamed of, it is not one we have to accept.

People have offered one another sanctuary in various forms throughout history. Christianity has a long tradition of such radical welcome—including biblical texts making clear the mandate to “welcome the stranger” and hundreds of churches that opened their doors as sanctuaries to runaway slaves in the 1860s, civil rights and anti-war activists in the 1960s, and migrants from Central America in the 1980s.

Formal and informal accompaniment networks have arisen across the United States to uphold the right to asylum even when the federal government rejects it. One such effort is the Asylum-Seekers Sponsorship Project, which recruits, prepares, and supports U.S. citizens to become official sponsors for asylum seekers. The project has taken up this call: “When Trump closes doors, we open them.”

Under the Trump administration, asylum seekers who are not turned back at the border are interviewed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and put in an immigration detention center. Few are granted bond or other release without a “sponsor” on record.

Sponsors are U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents willing to submit paperwork to ICE to secure an asylum seeker's release and then receive an asylum seeker into their home upon that release. Sponsors must have a fixed address to demonstrate stable residency and receive mail regarding the asylum seeker's court date and other legal proceedings; be able to provide a safe, comfortable place for asylum seekers to sleep; and provide the individual or families with necessities such as food, transportation, and clothing.

The Asylum-Seekers Sponsorship Project is creating a pipeline for matching asylum seekers with sponsors to increase chances for release until an immigration court date.

While all asylum seekers must have an individual named sponsor in order to secure release, an increasing number of congregations are interested in providing a community of support to wrap around an asylum seeker.

Since 2018, the project has connected dozens of asylum seekers with volunteer

**“WHEN TRUMP CLOSES DOORS,
WE OPEN THEM.”**

sponsors. For example, the congregational engagement strategy already has placed a family of six with a Jewish community in Philadelphia and transgender women with Unitarian communities in Minneapolis and Chapel Hill, N.C.

It is slow work to bring a congregation through the process of sponsorship, but it is rewarding. The project offers education to prepare members for an open-armed welcome, free from the trappings of white supremacy and patriarchy, and connects the community to other sponsorship congregations across the country. A few denominations—including the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, Religious Society of Friends, Unitarian Universalist Association, and the Presbyterian Church USA—are considering launching their own asylum-seeker sponsorship programs. Faith communities are well positioned to organize people and resources. Their built-in community of support makes a world of difference for an asylum-seeking individual or family.

Agreeing to offer housing and support for an asylum seeker means participating in a leap of faith that runs two ways: Both your household and the asylum seeker agree to share lives with strangers, at least for a while. Hopefully, the experience will build a community of care and solidarity that empowers the whole family to join in collective resistance to unjust policies.

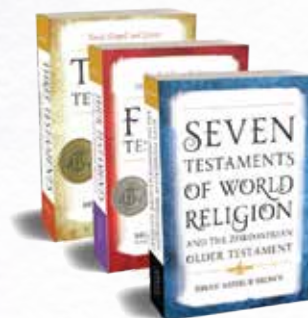
The Trump administration's violent and inhumane work to keep asylum seekers out of the U.S. is shameful, but people of faith have a proud tradition of disrupting these assaults on our neighbors and extending radical hospitality. ♦

Heather Cronk, a co-founder of the Asylum-Seekers Sponsorship Project (asylumcongregations@gmail.com), serves as political organizing director for the National Domestic Workers Alliance.

BRIAN ARTHUR BROWN

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COMMENTARY

BY EMILIE TERESA SMITH



LISTEN TO THE VOICE OF AMAZONIA

At the synod in Rome, Indigenous communities challenged the worldview that sees everything as a product for sale.

In October, Pope Francis convened hundreds of people in Rome to discuss the Indigenous face of the church in the Amazon. The three-week, multitrack meetings, which included lay leaders, members of religious communities, priests, expert witnesses, bishops, cardinals, and leaders of Indigenous organizations, was the result of a two-year listening process during which more than 65,000 people in the Amazonia region were asked: What are the most pressing issues you face?

The agenda used for the synod of bishops at the Vatican, as well as the wide variety of interconnected parallel gatherings around the city—under the umbrella of “The Amazon: Common Home” (*la Casa Común*)—outlined the collected wisdom: Listen to the voice of Amazonia. Pursue ecological conversion. Support the prophetic Indigenous church.

One parallel gathering met in the Church of Santa Maria in Traspontina, a 10-minute walk from St. Peter’s Basilica. Hundreds of Amazonian Indigenous leaders and guests met at Santa Maria to pray, listen, and conceive a new world—one that celebrates the eternal truth of the proclamation of Jesus Christ: We are all loved. We all belong. All creation is deeply connected.

Above all, the Amazonian people demand to be seen and heard, saying: We matter. Our belief systems, which hold all life as profoundly sacred, matter. We demand an end to the insidious destruction of our sacred home.

Indigenous leaders brought with them a rich and sacred language for

worship. Anitalia Claxi Pijachi Kuyuedo, a Huitoto Ocaina Indigenous delegate from Colombia, prayed over the community at Santa Maria, saying: “I am the earth. I am the forest. I am a *tigre*. But my skin is poisoned. You can see the poison in my skin. I am showing you my dying in my skin.” Kuyuedo demanded that the echo of her threatened people, the gasping of her fragile home, be heard.

Of course, there is a tension here too. Santa Maria’s massive architecture of white marble and shining gold was constructed to display the highest level of ecclesial power and might. But somehow that dominion dissolves in the gathered community below.

Pope Francis has called for “a change in the historical paradigm,” where governments and industry view Amazonia as a “storage room filled with natural resources, with little regard for the lives of Indigenous peoples or for the destruction of nature.”

This cry extends not only to the Catholic Church, but to the world. We are all invited to participate directly and concretely in confronting the mechanisms of destruction.

The synod provided an opportunity for the church to be converted, to seep into these ancient belief systems of the world, to remember that all creation is holy, that “the Earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it” (Psalm 24). Indigenous communities invite the whole church to challenge the mercantile view that sees everything on heaven and Earth as a product for packaging and for sale.

“The church is ready—almost ready—to cast aside diplomacy and to reclaim its prophetic voice,” said Eleazar López Hernández, a Zapotec Catholic priest from Mexico considered the “midwife” of Indigenous theology in Latin America and a special adviser to the synod.

At Santa Maria, our morning and evening prayers for the church included these words of encouragement: “Row into deeper waters. Don’t be afraid.” ✕

Emilie Teresa Smith, Anglican priest and co-president of the Óscar Romero International Network in Solidarity with the Peoples of Latin America, was an observer to the October synod’s parallel activities in Rome.

I

THE SHAME OF WAR PROFITEERING

In 2015, Pope Francis directed a provocative question to the U.S. Congress: “Why are deadly weapons being sold to those who plan to inflict untold suffering on individuals and society?”

As the source of roughly 36 percent of the world’s military exports, the United States is the largest weapons supplier in the world. According to data released last spring by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the U.S. exported arms to at least 98 countries in the past five years. These deliveries often included advanced weapons such as combat aircraft, short-range cruise and ballistic missiles, and guided bombs.

Ten of the 25 countries buying the most weapons from the U.S. are NATO members or part of other U.S. security alliances. In 2017, the U.S. set a record of \$75.9 billion in weapons sales in a year, pursuant to congressional approval. Saudi Arabia is the biggest recipient of U.S. arms. In August 2018, the Saudi military used a 500-pound, MK 82 guided bomb built by Lockheed Martin, a U.S. weapons manufacturer, to destroy a school bus in a market in the Yemeni town of Dahyan. They killed more than 50 people, including 40 children. One of the victims, Ali Mohammed Hassan Da’i, was 10 years old. Another, Ali Zaid Hussein Tayeb, was 9 years old.

In September 2018, two Yemeni children were killed in another bombing by the Saudi-UAE allied forces, with logistical support from the U.S. After sifting through a bombed home, rescue workers found the bodies of 3-year-old Nabil and newborn baby girl Sumood.

Imagine if these children were members of our own families: How would we feel?

In concert with arms contractors, the



U.S. is engaged in military intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. The U.S. continues its military support for the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The U.S. is proceeding with its military “pivot” in the Asia-Pacific in order to threaten and contain China. The U.S. wages drone attacks in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia. Moreover, the U.S. continues with plans to spend \$1 trillion over the next 30 years to “modernize” its nuclear weapons arsenal instead of eliminating it.

Why are these weapons of destruction made and sold? “For money—money that is drenched in blood, often innocent blood,” said Pope Francis.

Every September, the Air Force Association hosts more than 12,000 members of the defense industry at a weapons exposition near Washington, D.C. More than 149 exhibitors, including Lockheed Martin, Boeing, and Northrop Grumman, met this year to display military drones, space missile guidance systems, high-energy laser weapons, and more.

“In the face of this shameful and culpable silence, it is our duty to confront the problem and to stop the arms trade,” concluded Pope Francis to Congress. For more than 40 years, the Campaign to Stop the Arms Bazaar, a community of Catholics and other religious groups, have held a public witness at this event, to pray for peace and nonviolently resist the arms merchants who meet to make a killing in profits. War should always scandalize Christians—war profiteering should scandalize us all. ❖

**“THE UNITED STATES
IS THE LARGEST
WEAPONS SUPPLIER
IN THE WORLD.”**

Art Laffin is a member of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker in Washington, D.C., and editor of *Swords into Plowshares*.

EVERYTHING IS WAITING TO HAPPEN

3



Imagine yourself in a darkened theater. At center stage sits a woman, child on her lap, both wrapped in tonal greys. A tiny stream of light falls from above. Off left, large animals shift their weight on floorboards, chuff-chuffing their breath; foreign tongues murmur them calm. Off right, the only sound is of metal rasps running repeatedly down the length of blades; random sparks flare off the cutting teeth.

This is Epiphany. Everything is waiting to happen.

We know the narrative detail: Mary and Jesus, a manger, the Magi's star-trekking journey with camels and gifts to honor a "newborn king" (while Herod, like Pharaoh, plots a bloody offense).

But Epiphany is a season for paradigm shifts. What if we scramble the details?

Imagine this. Off left, the chuff-chuffing of foreign tongues come not from men calming beasts, but camels praying as they approach the child, the spiritual waterhole for the world. The camels have not brought kings or astrologers, but a guild of bakers, who extend platters of fresh bread toward the child. At center, the woman wrapped in a cloak of ultraviolet leans back on her stool: She has given birth to a star, filling them both with light. At her side stands a human child. He gazes off right. The sound of rasps and swords, boots and shouted commands fascinate him. Slowly, the

**"PARADIGM SHIFTS
BEGIN WITH A DARING
POLITICAL ACT."**

child lets go his mother's hand, relaxes his throat muscles, measures his breath. In a world of bread and circuses, he has made brothers of soldiers. He is a sword-swallower and eats their pain.

Third-century frescoes in Roman catacombs hold the earliest depictions of the Adoration of the Magi. In one, three men advance in a line toward a child standing in his mother's wide-legged stance, showing her authority. Others reveal the Magi extending platters of bread toward the child Jesus. Another illustrates men with camels approaching Mary and Jesus with gifts. The lead gift-bearer extends a disproportionately large right hand to an encircled star overhead. These are the earliest details of the nativity narrative: travelers, bread, camels, a wide-legged woman, a child, a star. Later portrayals add partially visible soldiers.

Epiphany is a time for imaginative leaps. Poet Denise Levertov notes that what we love about the greatest writers is the detail, "relevant, illuminating detail—which marks the total imagination, distinct from intellect, at work." But details are organized into narratives or paradigms that are containers of meaning. Is it possible to keep the details but transform the paradigm?

Walter Brueggemann reminds us that the world we take as "given" is only a long-established act of imagination "that appeals to be and claims assent as the only legitimate occupant of the field." Ingenious vaulting from one plane to the next happens when, "through a daring political act," a new paradigm is articulated, a new understanding revealed.

Same details, new story. The "long-imagined 'givens'" are challenged and a "counter given" becomes entertainable.

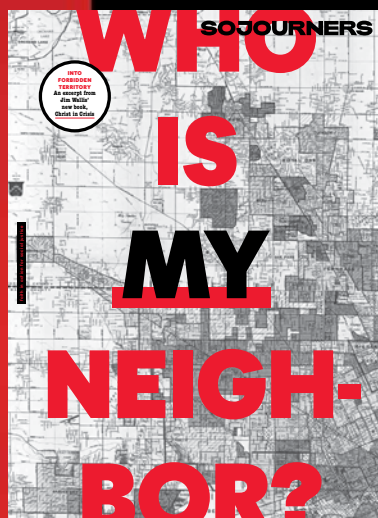
We sit in a darkened theater alongside our unspeakable sorrow—anxiety, brutality, grievous loss, alienations we never thought possible. The child faces us from the edge of the stage, a taste of metal still on his tongue. "Let me give you a gift," he says, "something made of starlight and old swords." From his mouth spews a million fireflies.

The people who walked in darkness have become a great light. Epiphany is our mystery. ❧

Rose Marie Berger is senior associate editor of *Sojourners* magazine, a Catholic poet, and author of *Bending the Arch*.



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SOJOURNERS

MOVING MOUNTAINS BY LISA SHARON HARPER

CHURCH, RE-FORMED



E

Everywhere I go I'm having the same conversation: Young and old alike seem to be streaming out of the church. On Oct. 17, the Pew Research Center released an update on America's changing religious landscape. According to Pew, "The share of U.S. adults who are white born-again or evangelical Protestants now stands at 16 percent, down from 19 percent a decade

ago." Christians are attending church at the same rate as a decade ago, but fewer people are identifying as Christian.

Church-attendance rates among affiliated Christians haven't risen as the dispassionate have left. It seems passion for church is dimming even among the affiliated. In conversations across America, I hear the same mantra: "Church hurts too much."

I get it.

I haven't had a home church since December 2015. On that last Sunday, amid the river of hashtagged lives that has flowed across social media since Trayvon Martin's murderer was set free in 2013, a pastor rose to the stage. White, male, and hip, he stood in the heart of empire—Washington, D.C.—and flipped through sacred texts written by brown, colonized, and serially enslaved people, landing on the book of Acts. He read a passage from the book that chronicles how the Holy Spirit moved through the earliest church to destroy hierarchies of human belonging imposed by empire. He read the passage and never came back to it. Later, hundreds of people swayed to three chords, inspired by the Bible's teaching on how to overcome conflict at a workplace.

"MY MOST POTENT TIMES OF WORSHIP HAVE HAPPENED WHILE LOCKED ARM IN ARM WITH JESUS FOLLOWERS."

Salty tears baptized my face as I walked away from church—not the church, just church: the ritual, the dance, the theater.

Less than a year later, Donald Trump won the Oval Office with white evangelical support. Three years later—after children have been locked in cages and died, the river of hashtagged lives has flowed across social media with more impunity, Native American lands have been consumed for oil drilling and fracking, and women have lost much access to health care—white Christians are still Trump's strongest base of support.

Trump's presidency, and the church's complicity in it, has revealed an ethical bankruptcy. How does a faith born of brown, Indigenous, colonized, serially enslaved people now find the locus of authority, the definers of boundaries and meaning, in the hallowed halls of empire—white, Western empire? White Western empire killed Jesus. How did those empowered by empire become the definer of this brown colonized man?

Although I have not had a home church since 2015, I have gone to church a lot in the years since. My most potent times of worship and communion have happened while locked arm in arm with Jesus followers as we prepared ourselves to present our bodies as living sacrifices on the front lines of the fight to protect God's image: in Ferguson, Charlottesville, South Africa, Brazil, Australia, Seattle, Chicago.

And in D.C., a small group of friends without a church are becoming church for each other, as we break bread, drink wine, and consider the implications of brown Jesus together.

We—the church—are being re-formed. And it is good. ✱

Lisa Sharon Harper is president of FreedomRoad.us and the author of several books, including the forthcoming *Fortune*, the story of her family and a call for reparations.



HYPOCRISY AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

America's openness to refugees has been a distinct feature of our country from its foundation. Our nation was established by communities facing discrimination elsewhere for their religious practices. In the periods when the country was not open to refugees and asylum seekers, such as during the Holocaust, it later became clear that we were on the wrong side of history.

The Trump administration announced this fall an annual admissions ceiling of 18,000 refugees for the next fiscal year, its third straight year of drastic reductions and a historic low. By comparison, almost 85,000 refugees were admitted in President Obama's last year in office. Trump's actions come at a time when the number of people fleeing conflict around the world is the highest since World War II.

Faith-based organizations in the United States have been at the forefront of refugee resettlement. The Trump administration decision threatens the already precarious structures around resettlement, which are largely religiously based. For many, the scriptural obligation to care for the stranger is a core religious belief. By having this capacity for service undercut, in many ways the faithful—across the spectrum from conservative to progressive—are unable to fulfill their religious obligations

for care. The administration's refusal to engage the many faith-based leaders and organizations who called for more, not less, openness to welcoming refugees decries its alleged commitment to religious freedom.

The actions of the Trump administration directly contradict many of civil society's interfaith engagement strategies. Inclusive policies that serve a range of faith communities are a key to demonstrate that religious freedom is valued in this society. Banning citizens from nations with one dominant religious faith becomes an example that can be used by other countries seeking to justify exclusive policies. Civil society gatherings that are interfaith in nature or symbolic in their function will not be enough to induce inclusive policies in international partnerships in the face of restrictive actions such as this fall's refugee limit.

I am a naturalized U.S. citizen. I did not come to this country as a refugee, but I—like many others who were religious minorities in their home nations and faced structural biases—viewed the U.S.'s more inclusive policies as necessary for my survival.

For the Trump administration to tout religious freedom as a priority for this country in international settings while holding back the avenue for escaping torture and persecution based on religious identity seems hypocritical at best and immoral at worst. It is not an effective strategy, and it undermines U.S. credibility in the area of religious freedom.

What message are we sending about religious freedom if our core policies defy the basic principle of supporting those who face serious persecution based on their faith? ✴

**"THE NUMBER OF
PEOPLE FLEEING
CONFLICT AROUND
THE WORLD IS THE
HIGHEST SINCE WWII."**

Najeeba Syeed has been recognized for her work in interfaith peacebuilding, restorative justice, and religious leadership in Muslim contexts. She is co-editor of a forthcoming volume on interreligious learning and theological education.

EYEWITNESS

4



**"YOU CAN'T BUDGET
YOUR WAY OUT OF
POVERTY."**

IF THEY CANNOT PAY, LET THEM THIRST?

“The Brightmoor neighborhood has one of the highest percentages of water shutoffs—and high rates of infant mortality, due to shutoffs. The ground is dry. People are very tense. You see a lot of skin diseases and rashes, especially on kids. You see it in guarded conversations. People aren’t going to come right out and tell you, ‘My water is shut off,’ but they may say to you, ‘I can’t boil those hot dogs—they’ll have to go in the microwave.’

We hear the narrative so often that people should just pay their water bill, but you can’t budget your way out of poverty. I am a disruptor of narratives. No, the lack of water is not because of your sin, or because you’re a bad parent, or because you buy a hair weave or spend money on a cellphone. None of that is true. Why don’t people have water? Because of unjust systems—because people are commodified, that’s why. If I saw you as a human being, I would be concerned that your baby doesn’t have enough bottles because you don’t have the water to make them with.

Faith leaders are silent, and silence means complicity. If we can have service on Sunday morning—taking communion, celebrating baptism—and somebody doesn’t have water, how in the world can we say we’re doing what we’ve been called to do? How is it possible that people can’t take showers and we’re still baptizing people with water? Come on.” ❖

Rev. Roslyn Bouier is a community pastor and executive director of Brightmoor Connection Pantry in Detroit. She spoke with *Sojourners* editorial assistant Hannah Conklin and associate editor Betsy Shirley about water shutoffs in her neighborhood.





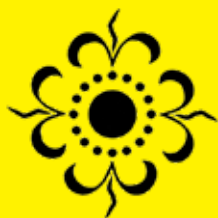
COMFORTABLE IN MY OWN SKIN

What I thought was beautification was actually

BY MAIKA LLANEZA



a form of erasing myself.



M

My experience being color-shamed began when I was 5 years old and still living in the Philippines. My mom and aunts often told me that I could be mistaken for “the maid’s daughter,” due to my darker brown skin. Even at a young age, I understood it was intended as an insult.

As I grew up, billboards, films, television shows, and magazines bombarded me with images of white Americans and Filipinas with white facial features. Mestiza Filipina models and actresses—celebrities admired by young girls like me—advertised skin-whitening products.

Color-shaming by other Filipinas continued after I moved to the United States at age 7. My mom, *titas* (aunts or older women), and *lolas* (grandmothers or elderly women) told me to “stay away from the sun” and “try not to get so dark.” They told me I would look even prettier if I had lighter skin.

This skin color hierarchy didn’t come just from other Filipinos. In junior high a boy I liked told my friend I was “too brown for his taste.” A white woman once asked my white boyfriend what he saw in me, a “brown chick.” When I was 27, I walked into a restaurant and a white lady told her friends, “Let’s get out of here. It’s getting too brown up in here.” Others have suggested I marry a white man instead of a Filipino so I can make “pretty light-skinned babies.” Not to mention the mostly white faces of U.S. mainstream media.

Beauty erasers

In *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins*, theologian Miguel A. De La Torre describes how dominant cultures view oppressed peoples as objects. But the problem runs deeper, explains De La Torre: “Persons viewed as objects accept their oppressors’ worldview as their own,” he writes, and “often

feel compelled to behave and act according to the way in which they have been constructed by others.”

While colorist and racist comments pained me deeply, it had not occurred to me how I had internalized these messages of brown-skin inferiority. And yet, I had: As a teen I used toxic chemicals to bleach my hair blonde, wore blue contacts, pinched my nose every night to form it thinner, and purchased shades of foundation lighter than my own skin tone. More recently, I highlighted my hair light brown and bought contour makeup to give the illusion of having white facial features: a thinner and pointier nose, higher cheekbones, a more chiseled bone structure. The more I looked like the white models and actresses on my Pinterest page, the more confident I felt.

If someone had asked me why I dyed my hair or wore so much makeup, I would have said it was my personal preference; I would not have attributed it to the constant stream of images promoting white beauty standards in the U.S. and the Philippines. I did not realize I was conditioned to want to look white.

One day, my theology professor assigned a reflection paper in which I had to look more closely into my culture and ancestry. Since I knew close to nothing about my history, I talked to my aunt, who encouraged me to read about our spiritual ancestors, including *babaylans* (Indigenous spiritual shamans and warriors) and the Itneg (people from the northern Philippines—my paternal ancestors). Once I began researching, I noticed they looked a lot like my natural self. It had never occurred to me that the light-skinned Filipinas in fashion magazines, movies, and television shows looked nothing like the people walking the streets of Manila. Unlike Filipino “media representatives,” most Filipinos have darker brown skin, dark brown hair, dark brown eyes, flat and wide noses, and almond or round-shaped eyes.

I began searching the internet for Filipinas with brown skin. I discovered models and actresses such as Asia Jackson using the hashtag *#MagandangMorenx*, or “pretty brown-skinned person,” to fight Filipino obsession with white skin.

Then I looked in the mirror, at my own dyed hair and the light beige highlight I’d brushed on the bridge of my nose, and questioned why I had not embraced my own natural beauty. What I thought was beautification was actually a form of erasing myself—replacing my dark brown hair, my brown skin, my brown eyes, and my flat nose with white features. Over time, I recognized that this was both a theological and an ethical issue: valuing whiteness over brownness where God meant for us to see ourselves as equals.

Ancestral beauty advice

I wanted to find a way to decolonize myself, to feel fully human as a Filipina American with darker brown skin, rather than a lesser version of another.

I started with decolonizing my skin. First, I threw away all my lighter foundation and contour makeup. I basked in the sun more often. I looked at more pictures of Indigenous Filipinos, admiring their skin tones so I could be more confident in mine. And I researched the ways my ancestors cared for and understood their own skin.

There is a misconception that Filipinos with darker skin work outside and are therefore lower class. To this day, some Filipinos use an umbrella to keep the sun away, cover themselves with skin-lightening cream, or visit the doctor to get regular skin-lightening injections. But Indigenous people of the Philippines celebrate their skin through ceremonies and rituals; darkness is valued as spiritual enhancement. Indigenous people gain spiritual energy from the sun, hand-tap ancestral tattoos to show their knowledge and wisdom, and adorn themselves with colorful, beaded clothing.

In *Way of the Ancient Healer*, Virgil Mayor Apostol includes many pictures of Indigenous people of the Philippines. Flipping through these pages was cathartic; instead of trying to look like a white American woman, I saw positive ways to enhance my own physical attributes. I noticed how these pictures empowered me, both in a spiritual sense and in a way that made me feel comfortable in my own skin.

I also found a book called *Filipino Tattoos: Ancient to Modern*, by Lane Wilcken. I learned that before Spanish colonizers arrived in the 1500s—and subsequently tortured people into Catholicism, enforced white superiority, and renamed the islands “the Philippines” to honor Spain’s King Philip II—part of the archipelago was called *Las Islas de los Pintados*, or “The Islands of the Painted Ones.” Pre-colonization, these native “Filipinos” were covered with *batok*, head-to-toe tattoos signifying beauty, identity, and ancestral heritage. Symbols on the left arm signified one’s maternal history; symbols on the right, paternal history. Each tattooed symbol or pattern had a deep meaning to the people who wore it, often accompanied by a story passed down through the generations.

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis asks what kind of world we want to leave to our children. “This question not only concerns the environment in isolation,” he writes. “When we ask ourselves what kind of world we want to leave behind, we think in the first place of its general direction, its meaning and its values. ... What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts?” *Batok* was a way for ancestors to answer these questions, an example of cultural empowerment where people celebrated their bodies through sharing art, history, and wisdom—specific to their tribe and lineage—to help guide future generations. *Batok* remains a symbol of inter- and intragenerational solidarity, binding family members together.

Not long after, Wilcken—one of five ancient Filipino tattoo practitioners in the world—hand-tapped symbols on my arm that were likely on my Indigenous ancestors from Bangued, Abra, in the northern part of the Philippines. It was another step toward my decolonization, another way to boost my self-esteem without erasing parts of myself.

Internalized oppression fades slowly

In the late 19th century, the U.S. colonized the Philippines and continued enforcing white superiority. In 1899, Rudyard Kipling called Filipinos “the white man’s burden.” That same year *The Boston Sunday Globe* published Filipino blackface on the front page with the headline: “Expansion, Before and After.”

After centuries of oppression, we have internalized this sense of our own inferi-

ture where white beauty standards are the default, I am constantly trying to be purposeful in what images I look at, what movies I see, and what books I read. I’ve tried to “fix” the issue by taking a break from social media altogether. Nevertheless, my conditioned, internalized-colorism self still lurks in my subconscious. Often, it feels easier to follow U.S. beauty norms than to find my own way. And it feels lonelier when the only other person I know who is on a similar journey lives thousands of miles away. Loving my true self is a battle.

Churches and Christians can help affirm and support people of color by facilitating uncomfortable conversations about colorism and internalized colorism—something many people of color experience (and are exhausted by) daily but is hardly talked about in Christian spaces. However, it’s an

I HAD INTERNALIZED MESSAGES OF BROWN-SKIN INFERIORITY.

ority to white people. To this day, some people with darker skin feel worthless. Globally, skin whitening is projected to grow to a \$31.2 billion industry by 2024—and Filipinas are some of the industry’s most loyal buyers.

In *Our Cry for Life*, theologian María Pilar Aquino writes that “one of the most important aspects of the contribution of women to liberation theology is the principle that liberation is not total if it does not also emancipate women from their repressive attitude toward themselves.” For me, this means eradicating the feelings of self-hatred and shame that I absorbed as a Filipina.

But overcoming internalized colorism is an ongoing process. I still find myself deviating from what I learned about Indigenous beauty and instead emulating those in my current surroundings. After I left sunny Southern California, a fellow Filipina commented on how much lighter skinned I’d become, and for a split second I considered it a compliment. And even after days of trying to change my Pinterest algorithm to show more pictures of Filipinas with darker brown skin, I found myself pinning pictures of light-skinned women such as the 2019 Miss Universe, Filipina Catriona Gray.

Because I am still immersed in a cul-

ture where white beauty standards are the default, I am constantly trying to be purposeful in what images I look at, what movies I see, and what books I read. I’ve tried to “fix” the issue by taking a break from social media altogether. Nevertheless, my conditioned, internalized-colorism self still lurks in my subconscious. Often, it feels easier to follow U.S. beauty norms than to find my own way. And it feels lonelier when the only other person I know who is on a similar journey lives thousands of miles away. Loving my true self is a battle.

Furthermore, Christian communities can join the work of dismantling colorism by supporting artists of color. Deliberately seeking out books, movies, documentaries, magazines, and other media that feature people of color can help us with our careers, dreams, and visibility—and prove there is a demand for this work. And with research and careful attention to cultural sensitivity, churches can display our spiritual artwork, including works that acknowledge our Indigenous heritage and recognize spiritual leaders with darker skin.

For us to authentically understand the gospel, marginalized people and cultures need to be visible, need to be heard in our churches. This reaffirms our dignity as people with black or brown skin and reclaims our wholeness as we meet more deeply our God of many colors, shades, and skin tones. ✱

Maika Llana is a 1.5 generation Filipina-American writer, special education teacher in New Orleans, and aspiring theologian attending Xavier University in Cincinnati.





Called to a Dangerous Oddness

The church is arriving at a moment of choice:

We either sign on uncritically to the powers that surround us, or we take on the prophetic task of exposing the contradictions and performing the alternatives.

By Walter Brueggemann

T

The prophets can only be understood if you understand that their context is an ideological “totalism” that intends to contain all thinkable, imaginable, doable social possibilities. That totalism always wants to monopolize imagination and technology so that there seem to be no serious alternatives.

In the ancient world of the Bible, that totalism is represented and embodied by the monarchy of Solomon in the Jerusalem temple. The king was surrounded by priests in the temple and by scribes who did the fine print to legitimate everything. And that totalism was completely intolerant of any alternative thinking.

We are able, in the Old Testament, to identify many of the features of Solomon’s totalism. First of all, it was an economy of extraction that regularly transferred wealth from subsistence farmers to the elite in Jerusalem, who lived off the surplus, and the device and strategy for that extraction was an exploitative tax system.

That totalism also needs a strong military. Solomon was an arms dealer. Partly, Solomon’s military was for show, and partly it was for intimidation. The totalism also had to exercise enormous economic opulence to impress people with wealth, so that Solomon’s temple is essentially an exhibit of Solomon’s much, *much* gold. The temple, and the priests who operated the temple, fashioned a series of purity laws to determine who the purer people and the impurer people were, to determine who had access and who was excluded from the goodies.

The three-chambered temple of King Solomon is a lot like a commercial airline. There was the outer court for women and gentiles. There was the inner court for guys in suits. And there was the holy of holies where only the high priests could go. And that’s a lot like the tourist cabin and the first-class cabin and the cockpit where only the high priests can go. Everything is delineated by rank, and therefore by opportunities that come with it. And this whole enterprise of extraction and exhibit and grandiose commoditization was all blessed by a very anemic God, whose only function was to bless the regime. So that under Solomon, you get a chosen king, a chosen city, and a chosen land, to the exclusion of all those who were not chosen.

What you can see in the biblical record is that this totalism was completely impatient with and intolerant of any alternative thinking. It was prepared to crush any alternative thinking, which was represented by the prophets.

What you get is the expulsion of the prophets, or the killing of the prophets, because they challenge the totalism that was legitimated by this anemic God.

ERUPTIONS OF POETRY

In the way the history of the Old Testament works, for 400 years you get a recital of the kings of the family of Solomon, and these are the point persons for the extraction system. But when you read along in First and Second Kings, what you see periodically are eruptions of poetry. These are the prophets who come from nowhere. They regularly unsettle the kings, and they come to occupy space in the historical recital. You can see first of all that those prophets are without a pedigree. They don’t have any credentials that legitimate what they want to say. Second, they come from nowhere. They are people who do not accept the truth of the totalism, and the way they articulate their coming from elsewhere is that they either say, “Thus says the Lord,” or they say “The word of the Lord came to me,” and “the Lord” becomes a kind of a signal

We are at a point when the church has to recover its nerve, its energy, its courage, and its freedom.

that this is a word that will not fit or accommodate the totalism.

The prophets, moreover, were deeply grounded in the old covenantal traditions and the wisdom traditions, so they knew that there were structures and limits inherent to the way of creation that could not be violated with impunity. They have a very vigorous notion of the governance of God. But along with that sense of tradition, they have an acute sense of social reality.

They know how to follow the money. They know that if you follow the money, what you can see is that the extraction system produces many grievances and cries of oppression and exploitation. And they have a peculiar affinity to the cries of injustice that they believe are the motor of creating futures. When you add all that up—no credentials, coming from elsewhere, knowing the tradition, doing social analysis—it is not surprising that the characteristic idiom of the prophets is that they speak in poetic rhetoric. They speak in language that on the one hand is porous and elusive and slippery, and on the other hand can be dangerous and offensive and scandalous to people who live inside the regime.

What you have in the Old Testament, when you read the royal history, are managers of extraction who tend to operate with an ambiguous memo. And disrupting that are these poetic voices that are dangerous and subversive, because they are voices that come from outside the totalism and refuse to accept the totalization as normative.

A LIVELY CHARACTER AND A REAL AGENT

If you take the phrase “prophetic imagination,” the imagination part is that the prophets are able to imagine the world other than the way that is in front of them. The word prophetic alludes to the reality of God. What the prophets believe deeply is that God is a lively character and a real agent who acts in the world, who causes endings and who causes new beginnings. And that’s worth thinking about, because that is not ordinary thinking among us—that God is a lively agent and a real character.

If you consider most conservative evangelicals, they do not believe that God is a lively character and a real agent, because they’ve got God all packaged up into sustained systematic explanations. And if you consider most theological progressives, they don’t believe that God is a real character and a lively agent, either, because they really believe that God has no hands but our hands.

So prophetic imagination is grounded in the conviction that God is doing something lively in the world. That it may be slow, but it is very sure, and that a new world is coming into being that will discredit and dismiss the old totalism.

We can identify three prophetic tasks:

1) The first prophetic task is to *be clear on the force and illegitimacy of the totalism*. And what we have to recognize is that almost all of us—conservative and liberals, clergy and laity—are to some extent inured to the totalism. We take it as normative. And to take that as normative is a great narcotic that makes us passive and apathetic. Becoming clear and unambiguous about the force of the totalism is a teaching point that we really have to work at.

2) The second task of prophetic imagination is that we have to *pronounce the truth about the force of the totalism that contradicts the purpose of God*. That’s called prophetic judgment. And my sense is that in the institutional church we are very quiet about prophetic judgment, because we and most of our parishioners are too deeply committed to totalism.

But if we understand the totalism honestly and clearly, then we have to talk about that contradiction. And we are able to say that a predatory system of economic extraction contradicts the purpose of God, that the extraction system in which we live is fueled by cheap labor. And as we all know, the history of cheap labor in the United States is grounded in the institution of slavery. So, many of our economic arrangements are simply tradeoffs to continue the practices of slavery.

The things that go with cheap labor and slavery include regressive taxation, high interest rates, stacked mortgage rates, and debt—you can imagine the way we are helping college students get into insufferable debt, which assures that they will be willing workers in the extraction system for all of their working life. Plus, we have to recognize that this system is committed to the deregulation of banks, and all sorts of deregulation that lets creation be exploited. Deregulation really means the unleashing of predatory forces against the vulnerable.

We have to recognize that the totalism in which we live is a system of incredible militarization, such as the militarization of the police and the militarization of sports. And it’s clear that the totalism is committed to consumerism. It believes that more stuff will somehow make us safe and will somehow make us happy. This combination of acquisitiveness, militarization, and consumerism adds up to





a doctrine of exceptionalism, which then gets translated into “Make America Great Again.” And it is all blessed by an anemic God who has no function except to bless white nationalism.

What prophetic judgment amounts to is making the case that acquisitiveness leads to violence, that militarization leads to bankruptcy, that consumerism leads to the evaporation of citizenship, that ecological exploitation leads to chaotic weather, that silencing leads to brutality, and that exceptionalism leads to white tribalism. It is a package that needs to be exposed at the teaching level of the religious community.

The first task is to identify the totalism. The second task is to identify the contradictions that put us on the route to death, because one can see that we now live in a society that is engaged in its self-destruction.

3) And the third task of prophetic imagination is to *articulate the alternative world that God has promised and that God is birthing before our very eyes. If we have eyes to see it.*

It is not often enough noticed that for all of the harsh judgment of Amos and Isaiah and Jeremiah, there runs through their rhetoric extraordinary promises about beating swords into plowshares and not learning war anymore. All of which have come to contemporary fruition in Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have A Dream.” It is a dream that imagines a world that is completely alternative to the one in which we now live.

IMAGINING THE FUTURE

Here are four dimensions of the future that prophetic imagination ought to be imagining:

1) The first is a new ecological perspective in which the earth and all of the creatures of the earth are treated like covenant partners who are entitled to dignity and viability. Every acre, every squirrel, every radish, every whale, every cornstalk is entitled to viability and respect. The new environmentalism is an alternative to the

Jesus is that great voice of otherwise, who saw the contradictions of the gospel to the Roman Empire and who acted out an alternative.

world of plastic accumulation that is killing our oceans and our ocean creatures.

2) The second facet of prophetic promise is a **new ecumenism** that makes room for chosen peoples other than Western white Christians.

That does not mean we Christians give up our claims about Jesus. And we are in the process of recovering Jesus. But it means we recognize that our claims about Jesus are not universal statements; they are confessional statements about how we intend to live our life. And that means that we have to make room for other religious traditions, respect the viability of their claims, and find allies where we can who are about the main prophetic tasks of justice and holiness.

3) The third facet is a **new economy** organized around a love of neighbor and committed to the viability of widows, orphans, and immigrants. Widows, orphans, and immigrants are people who, in the ancient world, did not have advocates empowered by the totalism in a patriarchal society. Obviously, the 1 percent intends to keep extracting from the vulnerable until we have only the 1 percent and a big collection of subsistence peasants who have no economic viability. We have to educate the church that we are not really in the charity business, we are in the justice business.

4) And fourth, the prophetic imagination means a **new multiculturalism** that opposes, in all the vigorous ways we can think of, white nationalism and all that's now about making white America Great Again. The Bible, because of its permeation with chosenness, lends itself too easily to that reading of tribal chosenness. But there are all kinds of trigger hints in the Old Testament and in the New Testament to the contrary—that chosenness has to remain open, that God is in the business of choosing many other peoples. Look at Peter's incredible vision in Acts 10, where God tells him to eat impure food to violate the old purity codes of Leviticus, and out of that comes this incredible dawning on Peter and Paul and all of the apostles that the good news of God's transformative love in the world is not a monopoly of any race or tribe or nation or tongue.

NO MORE MIDDLE GROUND

The practice of prophetic imagination requires energy, courage, and freedom and the sense of being otherwise. I have no doubt that we are now arriving at a moment when there is no more middle ground. That we either sign on uncritically to the totalism, or we take on this task of dangerous oddness that exposes the contradictions and



performs the alternatives.

Finally, I want to make a comment about the institutional church. The institutional church is a very weak instrument for the poetic imagination. But it is the best instrument we have—because when people come to church, they *expect* us to talk funny. They expect us to talk about God. We are now at a point when the church has got to recover its nerve, its energy, its courage, and its freedom.

To be about our proper business, the church cannot engage in prophetic imagination as long as it lives in the cocoon of the totalism. And that, of course, is where many clergy and the laity want the church to stay. Because you get rewards for that—you get money, payoffs, success. But our mandate and our vocation is otherwise.

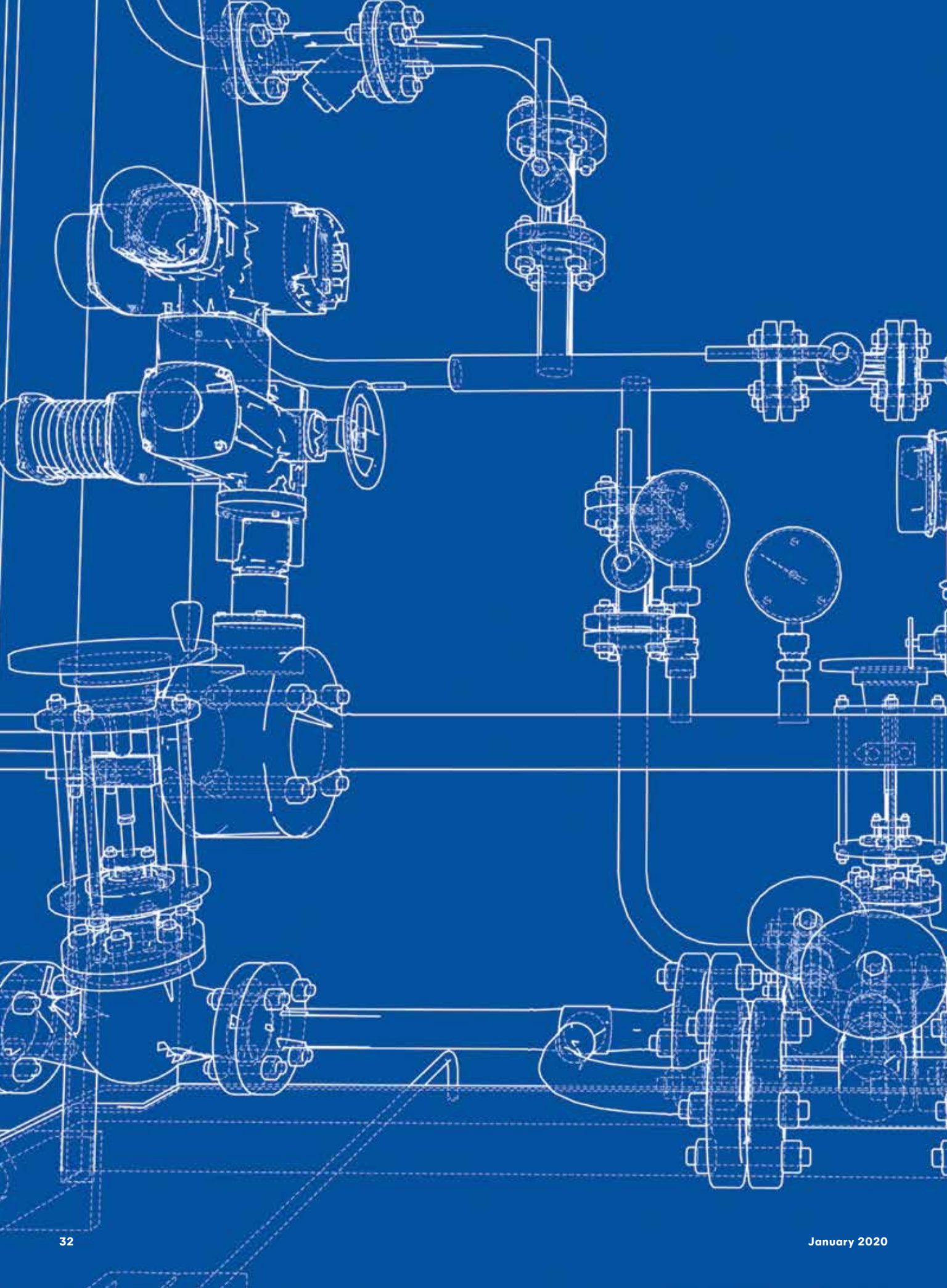
I think the church now must be more vigorously engaged in scripture, after having been lazy for a very long time. And the church must do a much better job of social analysis than we have done, because very many church people think that social analysis feels like communism—and clearly the prophets were doing social analysis before anybody ever heard of Karl Marx.

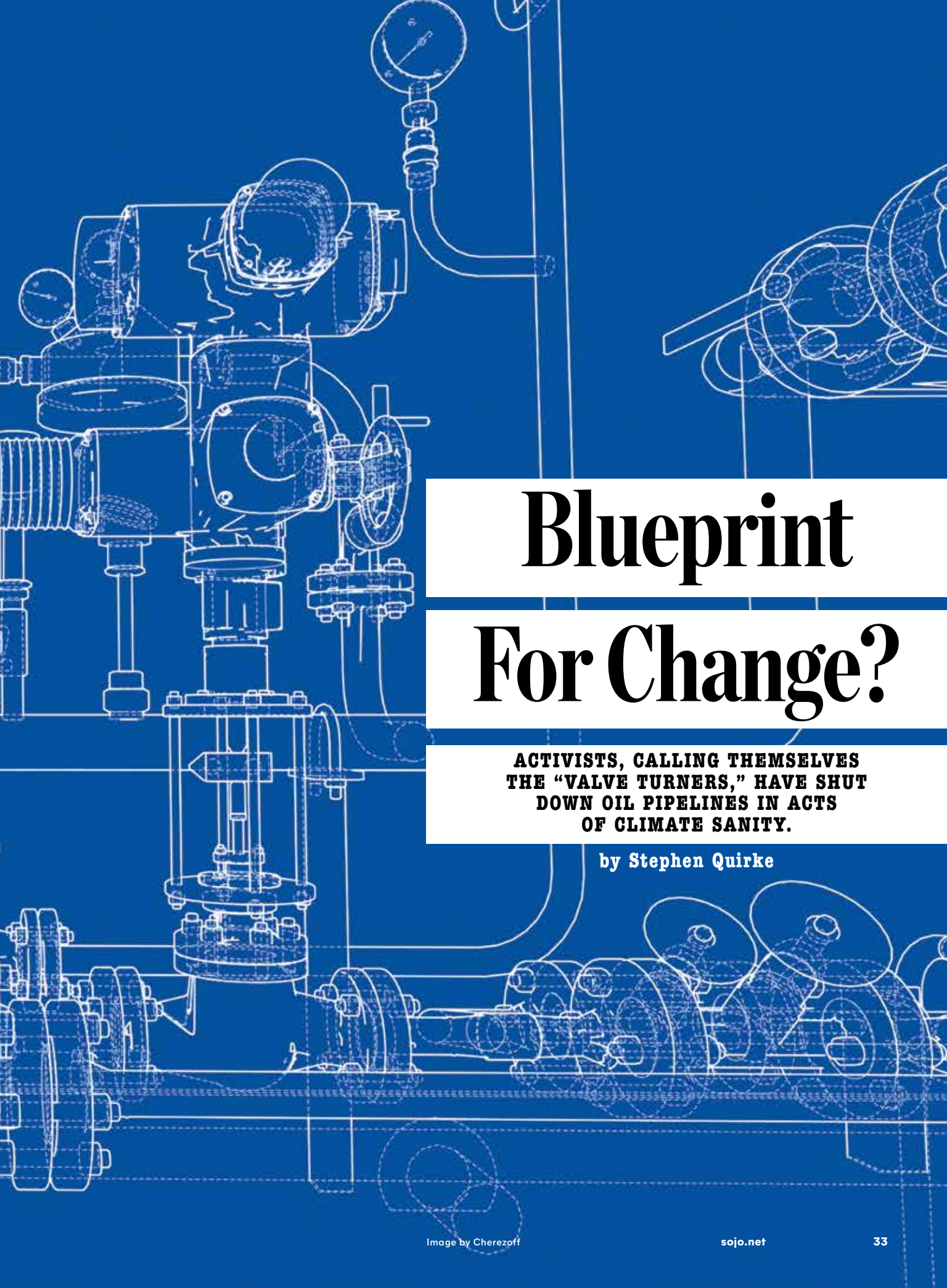
The good news, that you can see all around now, is that the Spirit is moving among us. It is the Spirit of Jesus. And Jesus is that great voice of otherwise, who saw the contradictions of the gospel to the Roman Empire and who acted out an alternative.

Good Friday, which keeps being re-performed, was the last desperate reach of the totalism of the Roman Empire. They did their best. Jesus was executed as an enemy of the totalism. And Easter is that strange, wondrous gift of newness that rushes beyond the totalism.

It is no wonder that Mark ends his gospel by saying that they were afraid. It is very fearful to discover that the totalism is not normal. But it is the truth of the matter. ✕

Walter Brueggemann, a *Sojourners* contributing editor, is professor emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Ga. This article is adapted from a speech delivered via video to participants of The Summit 2018, a project of *Sojourners*.

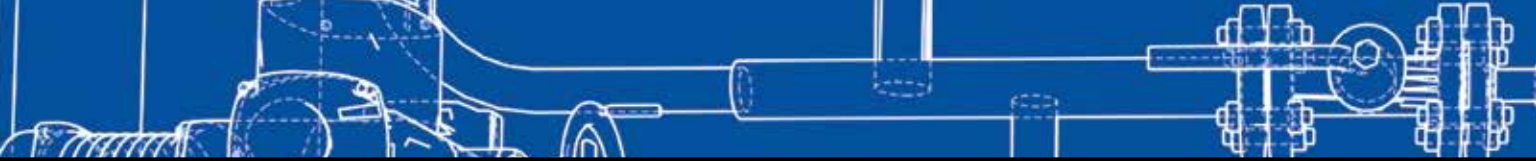




Blueprint For Change?

**ACTIVISTS, CALLING THEMSELVES
THE “VALVE TURNERS,” HAVE SHUT
DOWN OIL PIPELINES IN ACTS
OF CLIMATE SANITY.**

by Stephen Quirke



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The world has known since 2011 that at least 80 percent of all fossil fuels must stay in the ground to keep global temperatures below 2 degrees Celsius. This means that 90 percent of U.S. and Australian coal, and all Canadian tar sands, must stay in the ground. Yet in an August press conference, President Trump reacted to a question on global climate action by defending, at all costs, wealth creation from fossil fuels.

“I’ve made that [fossil fuel] wealth come alive,” Trump said. “We have more of it than anybody else. ... I’m not going to lose it on dreams, on windmills, which frankly aren’t working too well. ... We can’t let that wealth be taken away.”

That wealth, according to author and news anchor Chris Hayes, is valued at \$10 trillion to \$20 trillion. Hayes notes that \$10 trillion in today’s economy is roughly equivalent to the wealth lost by U.S. slave holders as a result of abolition. Comparing the political economies of the slave trade and fossil fuels, Hayes suggests the movement against fossil fuel extraction ought to be called “the new abolitionism.”

Yet, with no global climate plan, the warnings from scientists have become more dire. Many now grapple with depression, while others undergo what’s been called “climate grief.” In 2015, global levels of carbon dioxide surpassed 400 parts per million, a trajectory that takes the world into global heating, ocean acidification, and species collapse. If governments and corporations won’t keep fossil fuel reserves in the ground, it’s clear that others will have to step in. Fortunately, some have.

Shut it down

On Oct. 11, 2016, five people orchestrated the largest coordinated shutdown of oil pipelines in U.S. history. With nothing more than bolt cutters, the “valve turners”—Michael Foster, Leonard Higgins, Emily Johnston, Annette Klapstein, and Ken Ward—used emergency shut-off valves to close five pipelines in North Dakota, Minnesota, Montana, and Washington carrying Canadian tar sands crude into the United States.

In an action that “shook the North American energy industry,” according to Reuters, the valve turners disrupted 2.8 million barrels of tar sands heavy crude for almost a day—equal to 15 percent of daily U.S. consumption. Before shutting the lines off, the valve turners notified the engineers responsible for monitoring them. The five waited until local sheriffs took them into custody. The valve turners and their support team were charged with 27 felonies and 15 misdemeanors.

“There’s [a climate] emergency, and we have been late to the scene,” Foster, one of the five, told *Sojourners*. “As much as we have to stop all these new [fossil fuel] projects, we actually have to shut down some of our existing consumption, our existing production, our existing transportation. If we don’t do that, then we could spend the next 30 years fighting every new project, and win, but we would still all be eliminated.”

For activists like Foster, keeping 80 percent of fossil fuels in the ground makes direct action a necessity. Others have taken similar steps: In 2015, Vanessa Gray shut off a pipeline carrying tar sands oil through her First Nation’s territory in Ontario. In 2017, Ruby Montoya and Jessica Reznicek in Iowa pierced Dakota Access pipeline valves with welding tools.

“Four Necessity”

In 2019, another group of “valve turners” struck.

On Feb. 4, four people in rural Minnesota gained access to the manual shut-off valves for Enbridge’s controversial Lines 3 and 4, which carry tar sands oil from Alberta to Wisconsin. Enbridge Inc., a Canadian company, is responsible for the largest inland oil spill in U.S. history.

The “Four Necessity Valve Turners,” as they call themselves—Brenna Cussen Anglada, Daniel Yildirim, Allyson Polman, and Michele



“CHRISTIANITY AND CLIMATE ACTION SHOULD BE SYNONYMOUS.”

Naar-Obed—are affiliated with the Catholic Worker movement, an international network of Catholic communities founded in the U.S. in 1933 by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin. Day and Maurin stressed taking personal responsibility for those who suffer, even at personal cost.

In a public letter, the four activists stated their intention to take “responsibility by standing in the way of this deadly fossil fuel industry.” Anything short of direct action, they said, is “lethally inadequate.”

“As Christians, it’s important that we take personal responsibility for one another,” said Polman, a farmer from Texas. Polman joined the Catholic Worker movement after campaigning with Frack Free Denton, helping to pass the first citywide fracking ban in Texas. The victory was short-lived. Months after Denton voters outlawed fracking, the state nullified the will of the people. Polman, disheartened, began to reconsider her options.

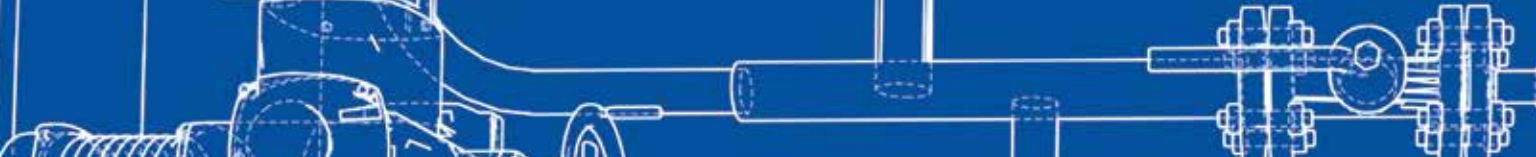
For Naar-Obed, the 2016 valve-turner action was not only inspiring but “very doable.”

“I felt like I was being called to actually help bring it into fruition,” explained Naar-Obed, who learned about earlier valve turners while studying Pope Francis’ major religious work on climate and economics, *Laudato Si*. She pondered her own obligation to address the climate crisis.

Naar-Obed has experience with extensively researched, carefully planned, and deeply discerned direct action through her participation in the Plowshares movement, a Christian anti-nuclear weapons campaign that advocates nonviolent direct action in defense of life. She said she approached the valve-turner action with a great deal of caution. “I spent a lot of time talking with my spiritual director, trying to discern: Is this a call or is this frustration?” said Naar-Obed. “The preparation, for me, was learning how to hear the Spirit. Really recognizing that this is the Spirit and not my own voice, not my own ego.”

Before meeting Naar-Obed at a retreat in 2018, Polman had struggled with her faith and struggled with the Catholic Church. “I had been praying for older women to mentor me,” Polman said. “Then I heard Michele talk, this humble and grounded woman, who has done multiple Plowshares actions in resistance to nuclear war, and all this work she has done was because of her faith in Jesus, as an activist. My idea of how we see Jesus turned in a whole new way.”

Polman decided to join Naar-Obed in a valve-turner action. For nine days prior to the February pipeline shutdown in



Minnesota, Polman prepared spiritually by offering a rosary novena, an ancient Christian prayer cycle focused on the mystical experiences of Jesus, usually prayed using a string of beads to count the prayers. For six of those days, her companions joined her.

"It makes me cry, because it's just so beautiful," said Naar-Obed. "You can't help but know that the ancestors that we invoked in our prayers, and the saints and angels, were right there with us. We brought those rosary beads with us [to the pipeline substation]."

In the early hours of Feb. 4, with temperatures in the single digits, Anglada, Yildirim, Polman, and Naar-Obed arrived at the block valve site of Enbridge's Lines 3 and 4. They cut the gate lock, then called the posted emergency number to alert Enbridge of their intention to shut down the lines. Despite the team's extensive research and preparation, the tools they brought to manually shut off the pipes didn't work. They attempted to remove the valve-control cap with a pipe wrench, a stick, then a wooden crucifix. Nothing worked.

After two hours, they heard a whirring noise—and watched Line 4 slowly shift to the off position. "We were about to give up on how to get that cap off. And then [the line] went down. The timing was just incredible. We broke into song at that point," said Naar-Obed.

Later they noticed that Line 3 was also off. Enbridge had shut the lines remotely.

Within half an hour, the Four Necessity Valve Turners were arrested. They were held for two days in the county jail, pled "not guilty" to felony trespass and misdemeanor property damage, and were released without bond.

Lines 3 and 4 are two of five Enbridge-operated pipelines that together carry more than 2.5 million barrels of tar sands crude oil per day across northern Minnesota. They were down for at least four hours. "Doing the valve turning was a spiritual act: an act of grief, and an act of celebration—grief for the violence done to the earth and other vulnerable lives, and also a celebration for life," said Polman.

An antidote to despair

Although the 2016 valve turners identified their motivation as strategic rather than religious, the message of the Catholic Workers is not foreign to them. Like the Catholic Workers, each wrestled with how to keep faith in an era of upheaval and climate collapse.

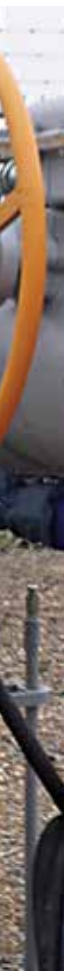
"Christianity and climate action should be synonymous," said Foster, one of those engaged in the 2016 action and a former family counselor who was raised Southern Baptist. "When you immerse yourself in the climate science, and you understand the politics and the economics that are driving this suicidal planet-killing experiment forward, it's very similar to being born again,



into a world where you can pull back the veil and see ... an actual physical reality, and it's dying. It's difficult to describe to people who haven't experienced that. So, being 'in the world and not of it,' as a Christian, and being 'in the world and not of it,' as a climate activist, are very similar things."

To be fully in the world of climate chaos means to deal with a despair that threatens to crush. For most of the valve turners, direct action was an antidote to this—an alternative to feeling defeated by the latest hurricane, the biggest wildfire, or the latest climate science announcing that things are much worse than we previously thought. Ken Ward's struggle with despair is detailed in *The Reluctant Radical*, a documentary film about the 2016 pipeline shutdown. The most important factor to overcoming climate despair, Ward told *Sojourners*, is how the people in your life respond—whether they support you or decide you're crazy.

"Those of us who've been doing this for a while, we just assume that people will regularly be incapacitated.



Someone will say, ‘I just read a bunch of stuff, and I just can’t deal.’ You have to tend to them; you have to worry about them. It’s going to keep getting worse, because the situation is getting worse,” Ward said.

Ward, who studied in Boston at Andover Newton Theological School, told *Sojourners* he re-reads the story of Jesus clearing the money changers out of the temple (John 2:13-16) before every climate action “just because it’s fun.” He also returns to Genesis 6-9 and the story of Noah, the great flood, and its resolution in the “rainbow compact.” Ward views this story as the foundation for a renewed ecological ethic in the era of climate breakdown—one that explains the current onslaught of disasters through a biblical lens. The rainbow compact, he explained, created mutual obligations between God, humans, and all other living beings on Earth.

“Here we are killing off the other members of the compact. So that frees up God to flood us again. God does say next time it won’t be a flood, it will be a fire. Apparently, we’re going to get both,” Ward said. He spent two days in jail for his role in the 2016 pipeline shutdown.

Faith in the mystery

When valve turners acted in 2016, they sent a letter to President Obama asking him to declare an emergency and keep the valves off forever. But several valve turners from that group, as well as the Minnesota group, insist that they turned off these pipelines without expectations.

Higgins, another member of the 2016 group, called it “faith in the mystery”—saying that one can never know the outcomes of one’s actions. At the same time, Higgins does not necessarily believe humanity will survive climate collapse. “I don’t have faith that God, or the innate goodness, or the arch of justice is going to turn things in the way they need to go. I think it’s just as possible that it won’t,” he said.

“We’re awaiting a trial that could have greater implications, but for us we decided this is a faith-based action, and whether or not it would change things practically, we are doing it,” Polman told *Sojourners*.

Not every valve turner agrees. “I’m so impatient,” said Foster. “It’s hard for me to trust the ripples that connect what I did in 2016 with the Minnesota valve turners and to Extinction Rebellion now. When I shut off that Keystone pipeline, I needed a thousand people to go and



“THE PLANET CANNOT WAIT. IT JUST CAN’T HAPPEN FAST ENOUGH.”

do the same thing a week later. The planet needed a thousand people to go out and do the same thing. The planet cannot wait. It just can’t happen fast enough.”

However, Foster also said that turning off the Keystone pipeline was “a rare and wonderful moment, when I was certain that I was standing on the right side of history. Whatever history is left—50 or 500 or 5,000 years—I’m on the right side of that.”

Returning to his beliefs about Christianity and climate action, Foster reflected, “Jesus says, ‘You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.’ As horrible of a shock and burden as it is to understand our dilemma, we can’t live here in a Christlike way and not be willing to sacrifice our lives. If Jesus were here today, he would probably be shutting off a pipeline.” Foster spent six months in prison for his participation in the 2016 valve-turner action.

Higgins offers a counterpoint. “It’s really not a sacrifice,” said Higgins. “It’s a chance to survive and come through in a much better place than we started. The worst circumstance for me is fully understanding the climate emergency, fully understanding the impact on my kids and grandkids and community, and not seeing anything significant I can do to prevent it. To be involved in something on a scale that seemed to have a good chance of having some kind of impact—it was pure bliss.” Higgins was given a three-year deferred sentence, along with a \$4,280 bill for restitution and court fees for his 2016 valve-turner action. (Charges against Johnston and Klapstein were dropped.)

Blowback

In 2017, the corporate-funded American Legislative Exchange Council developed legislation that would increase the penalties against anyone convicted of disrupting pipeline operations. Last year, the Trump administration introduced legislation that would expand definitions of pipeline damage, which carry up to a 20-year sentence, to include vandalism. Seven states have increased penalties for anyone protesting pipelines.

Conversely, in October, California banned state agencies from providing licenses to build oil and gas infrastructure—such as pipelines—on state lands. Other states are likely to follow.

The trial of the Four Necessity Valve Turners begins in June. ♦

Stephen Quirke is a journalist based in Portland, Ore. His work has appeared in *Mother Jones* and *Earth Island Journal*.

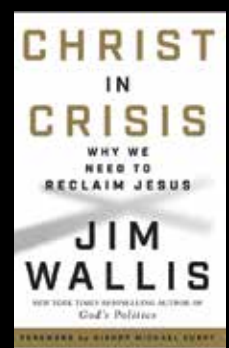
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SOJOURNERS

ANNE LISTER WAS A WOMAN, BUT SHE WAS CERTAINLY NO LADY.



That's clear from *Gentleman Jack*, the HBO television series based on Lister's life, which spanned 1791 to 1840. *Gentleman Jack* covers her daring ascent of the Pyrenees, macabre interest in human dissection, penchant for risky business dealings, and delight in women—both high-born and low—all while she gads across Europe in a man's greatcoat, cravat, and waistcoat.

We know of Lister's exploits because she wrote them down, in a secret code of her devising. In between her romps, she recorded everything from the weather and her breakfast to her deepest thoughts and cares. All told, she wrote some 5 million words over 26 volumes. Lister's diary is so important to the understanding of the private lives of British women in the 19th century that it has been called the "lesbian Dead Sea Scrolls."

"I love and only love the fairer sex," Lister proclaims in its pages, "and

TV

thus, beloved by them in turn, my heart revolts from any other love than theirs."

But while Lister may have been largely unconventional for her time, she was a rather traditional 19th-century Anglican. *Gentleman Jack's* focus in its first season (which concluded in June 2019) is Lister's desire to find a wife and marry her in the eyes of God—something she accomplished by force of will and a prescient faith that, to quote Lin-Manuel Miranda, "love is love."

"Anne craved the permanency, and,



ironically, respectability, of a romantic union solemnized in the same way as a marriage,” writes Anne Choma, a historian and consultant to the series, in her book *Gentleman Jack: The Real Anne Lister*. “She saw no reason that she and the woman she loved should not declare their commitment before God.”

The series sticks close to the known facts of Lister’s last decade: Fresh from a turbulent breakup, Anne Lister courted her Yorkshire neighbor, the heiress Ann Walker. In 1834, the two exchanged rings, but Lister needed more. On Easter Sunday, they attended services at a parish church in York and took communion together. For Lister, this sanctified their union as a marriage.

“Miss W and I and Thomas [their servant] stayed the sacrament,” her diary notes. “The first time I ever joined Miss W in my prayers. I prayed that our union might be happy.”

Gentleman Jack shows Lister and Walker trading rings, sitting together in a pew, touching hands as they approach the altar, and taking communion side by side at the rail.

What inspired Lister to fashion her own same-sex union? She lived in a time when gay sex between men was punishable by death and the word “lesbian” had not yet been invented. She certainly never heard a sermon about love between women being holy and acceptable. And same-sex marriage wouldn’t be on anyone’s radar for another 150 years.

Bernard Schlager, executive director of the Center for LGBTQ and Gender Studies in Religion, says Lister’s Christian faith is the key. “Anne Lister was aware of models of same-sex love in classical literature and she knew quite a few other women in her day who we might call lesbian,” he said. “Since Lister did not write explicitly about reconciling her faith with her sexuality, we can only surmise that it was through the living of

**“SHE SAW NO
REASON THAT
SHE AND THE
WOMAN SHE
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BEFORE GOD.”**

her life as a Christian woman who loved other women that she found strength to be the person God intended her to be.”

The series touches on this. Lister, played with great verve by actress Suranne Jones, declares that God made her as she is, and later says to Walker, played by Sophie Rundle: “If I were to lie with a man, surely that would be unnatural. Surely that would be against God.”

Rev. Kittredge Cherry, a Metropolitan Community Church minister, included Lister in a series she wrote about LGBTQ people of faith. “Anne Lister was sure of both her lesbian identity and her Christian faith,” she said. “She approached religion with intellectual rigor as a strong but not unquestioning Anglican. ... Many people today will recognize her desire to grapple with religious ideas instead of simply accepting everything that church leaders say.”

Victoria Kirby York, who as deputy director for advocacy and action at the National LGBTQ Task Force works at the intersection of spirituality and politics, is a fan of the show. As a Christian and a lesbian, she sees many of the issues important to today’s LGBTQ community reflected in Lister’s story. “I think her life speaks to the reality that, yes, we have a desire to be with everyone else, but we are also good at creating our own spaces,” she said. “We don’t need anyone to justify us. Only God can justify us, and I think Anne Lister was very good at that and created a path for us to think that way, too.” ✦

Kimberly Winston is a freelance religion reporter whose work has appeared in the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. She is the 2005 recipient of the American Academy of Religion’s award for best religion reporting.

From
The Farewell

DON'T TELL HER

By Chris Karnadi

You may know 別告訴她 by its English title: *The Farewell*.

The second feature film from director Lulu Wang stirred audiences with a story from Wang's family. In the film, the main character, Billi, joins her family in China as they convene a wedding as an excuse to say goodbye to her grandmother, who has a terminal illness but does not know it.

At the wedding, the grief of imminent loss peeks through the haphazard nuptials. In some of the film's most memorable moments, toasts take heartrending turns into breakdown, and a drinking game provides space to drown sorrows with alcohol and laughter.

In the game, Billi's family is seated at a round table. Chanting in Chinese, one person repeats a phrase while flapping their arms like wings, then looks to another person, who takes over the chant. Whoever makes a mistake takes a shot. The general mechanics of the scene are clear, but unlike most of the film, there are no English subtitles.

The Mandarin Chinese breaks the audience into those who piece together the scene from context and those who understand the dialogue. The emotion of the scene may be universal: Hiding grief happens in all families. But the specific cultural scripts, how we go about hiding, belong to each of us.

In a letter published before the film debuted in select theaters, Wang spoke of how many times she had to fight for her vision, her story with its cultural detail, to be told. "I had to say 'No' a lot [to production companies]," she said. "'No, I will not change the ethnicity of the cast. No, I will not have them speak English. No, I will not have these characters talk or behave in any way that doesn't feel authentic to the people I know.'"

Wang offers an honest portrayal of her people and, in

doing so, some of the film remains unintelligible. In scenes like the untranslated drinking game, *The Farewell* shows us that one's culture doesn't have to be for anyone else.

Memories of my grandmother in Indonesia replayed as I watched Wang's film. I've seen her just seven times over the course of my life, and over time I've become more aware that each goodbye might be my last. This past December, I stood with her at her future grave. She handed me rose petals to spread over my grandfather's place of rest.

The flowers fluttered as they left my hand, briefly breathed into by the wind before dropping to the ground.

Ga tau kapan kita ketemu lagi.

I wrote that for me more than for you. I'm sure you'll understand. ❀

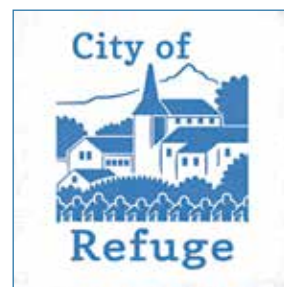
Chris Karnadi is an assistant editor of Duke Divinity's Faith and Leadership.

THE EMOTIONS MAY BE UNIVERSAL BUT THE SPECIFIC CULTURAL SCRIPTS BELONG TO EACH OF US.

ORDINARY HEROES

The 10-part podcast *City of Refuge* tells the little-known story of a French village that resisted the Nazis during World War II and saved 5,000 refugees. A model for collective strength, *City of Refuge* shows what happens when ordinary people act in extraordinary ways.

Waging Nonviolence



Black Brits

Girl, Woman, Other, the Booker Prize winner by Bernardine Evaristo, explores the U.K.'s deep roots of racism and how 12 black people in Britain—11 women and a gender nonbinary person—navigate their multifaceted identities.

Black Cat



Gospel of Justice

An extensive group of essays from many voices comprise the collection *Evangelical Theologies of Liberation and Justice*. Editors Mae Elise Cannon and Andrea Smith provide readers a theological foundation for faith and activism, building on the framework of evangelicalism and liberation theology.

IVP

A SANE COUNTRY WOULD WELCOME THEM

By
Danny Duncan
Collum



Eyes & Ears

It was April 2017, just a couple of months into the Trump era, and our family was at our parish's Easter vigil—a three-hour-plus Saturday night service that begins with a bonfire and includes the baptism and confirmation of those who've spent the last year preparing to enter the church. Our parish has one of the largest Hispanic communities in the area, so our Easter vigils are always bilingual.

By the time we distributed communion, it was around 11 p.m., and as I watched the procession of my Catholic neighbors go by, I was struck by the sight of the brown-skinned men, husbands and fathers in their 20s and 30s, coming down the aisle with sleeping babies cradled tenderly in their arms. They were contradictions to the president's words: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best."

The recent Netflix documentary series *Living Undocu-*

mented follows eight families through all nine circles of U.S. immigration hell. The immigrants in the series are from Honduras, Mexico, Colombia, Laos, Mauritania, and Israel. But all of them, even the Laotian guy who picked up a drug felony in his troubled youth, are people any sane country would welcome. And our government is doing everything it can to send them away.

The series' footage ranges from gut-wrenching to enraging. Kids talk about the pressures on their parents. Parents share fears for their kids. And American friends stand by, embarrassed at their government's actions, and try to be supportive. Only occasionally is the fly-on-the-wall drama of the series interrupted, so we can hear an immigration lawyer explain the relevant regulations, or see Jeff Sessions announce a policy that can be summed up as deterrence-via-cruelty.

I admit that I've always found the slogan "Abolish ICE!"—meaning U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement—to be, at best, counterproductive, especially if it implies that the country shouldn't have border laws of some sort and some agency to enforce them. But I now at least see where the emotion behind the slogan originates. At one point in *Living Undocumented*, we see a supremely arrogant ICE officer trick a young immigrant into a situation where he could be detained, then physically assault the immigrant's attorney.

The statistics clearly show that these families are much more representative than the president's "bad hombres." *Living Undocumented* is powerful evidence that our government, on our behalf, is deliberately inflicting torment on people whose greatest crime was to believe in the American dream. ❧

Danny Duncan Collum, author of the novel *White Boy*, teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort.



**YOU CANNOT REMAIN NEUTRAL
TO THIS EXPERIENCE: YOU MUST
WALK AWAY OR CONFRONT THE
REALITY.**

Consequently, you don't read her poetry, you engage it. *Bending the Arch* is an encounter that requires something of the reader. It provokes. It reveals. It imagines. It asks for full attention, deep reflection, and emotional response. This poetry does not leave you alone but pulls you in, looking for more and more understanding as the layers of meaning begin to coalesce into a narrative of human triumph and tragedy. You cannot remain neutral to this experience: You must walk away or confront the reality.

If you stay as this poetry weaves threads of perception from different cultures, you will soon make a discovery. There is a hidden healing in *Bending the Arch*: a medicine woman's wisdom in locating sources of pain and her skill in trying to alleviate it. For all the stories of struggle in these poems and realizations of missed chances and arrogant expansionism, there is a clear hint of hope, a reconciliation that is always at the fingertips of possibility. Many nations

Berger gathers into an epic memory.

"In the end," she writes, "it is the fact of the arch / not the myth of the arch / that stands ... In the end there is only / land world and light world / and us—a thin muscular word / stretched between." In this intricate summation of a historical experience, Berger connects us, all of us. She reaches back through time and space, through our story. She draws out the poison. She puts her hand on the hurt. She breathes new life into old memories. She makes the hidden seen. ♦

Steven Charleston is an elder of the Choctaw Nation and the retired Episcopal bishop of Alaska. He is the author of *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus* and many other books.

AN EPIC MEMORY

Bending the Arch: Poems,
by Rose Marie Berger

Resource Publications

Rose Marie Berger doesn't know it yet, but through her tour-de-force poems in *Bending the Arch*, she has become a holy woman of many nations. Among my own people, she would be called one of the *alikchi*, a sacred healer, a doctor of the people, a woman who can restore balance to lives that have been shattered. She does this through the strong medicine of words.

Berger, poetry editor and a columnist for *Sojourners*, describes *Bending the Arch* as "ethnopoetic documentary poetry." "Ethno" because it speaks with the accents of a dozen different cultures: European settlers, Chinese miners, Native American leaders. "Poetic" because it uses a cat's cradle of language from different moments, people, and realities. "Documentary" because it covers a vast scope of America's manifest destiny history, symbolized by the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, which is depicted on its cover. All these are contained in layers of history, one on top of another, until the spiritual sediment of Berger's meaning begins to become clear.



SETTING A TABLE FOR ALL

I Was Hungry:
Cultivating Common Ground to End
an American Crisis,
by Jeremy K. Everett

Brazos Press



If all the hungry people in the U.S. were gathered into one state, its population would roughly match that of California. According to the USDA, 40 million Americans are food insecure. This means 1 in 8 Americans lack sufficient food to live a healthy life.

Our children fare even worse. In the richest nation the world has ever known, 1 in 6 children will at some point this year

be left with a growling belly, wondering where their next meal is coming from, and when. In South Texas, where Jeremy Everett works to end hunger, 1 in 2 children face such dire straits.

According to Everett, to tackle a problem as large and complex as hunger, individual trust, commitment, and community buy-in are crucial. They are not enough, though: Widespread collaboration is also required. Communities must join forces with other communities, non-governmental organizations, businesses, and government at all levels. They must pool their resources and knowledge and coordinate their efforts.

Everett learned the importance of strategic collaboration from the Federal Emergency Management Agency's woefully inadequate response to Hurricane Katrina—how FEMA scrambled to provide essential services to hundreds of thousands of displaced people. Desperate for help, it turned to NGOs, businesses, and community-based groups such as the Baptist social services agency where Everett

worked. Despite FEMA's last-minute collaborations, its response to Katrina was itself a disaster.

With FEMA's failures in mind, Everett launched the Texas Hunger Initiative (THI), an organization that has formed strategic partnerships with the USDA and Texas state agencies, businesses, and communities. After 10 years in operation, it provides 100 million meals to Texans annually and has helped set up more than 5,000 meal sites to feed children in the summer months, when they don't have access to free school lunches.

While THI's efforts have been largely successful, Everett doesn't pretend that success comes easily. Collaboration requires openness and trust, which in these hyperpartisan times are in short supply. Plus, NGOs don't always work well together, often because they are competing for the same funds. And the relationship between the business and public sectors can be contentious, especially when government doesn't defer to business interests.

I Was Hungry calls us to leave our politics behind, to lead with actions rather than ideology and seek common ground for the common good. It calls us to live up to the gospel we proclaim, heed the need in our communities, and feed the hungry in our midst. In short, it calls for fundamental change—in ourselves and how we fight hunger. Such change will not come easily, but millions of Americans are hungry for it, hungrier than most of us can imagine. ♦

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Texas

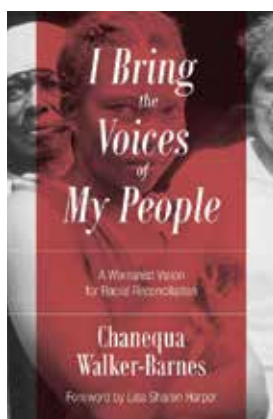
Jon Little is a freelance writer in Nashville, Tenn. He writes on mindfulness, fatherhood, and faith at mindfuldaddy.com.



I AM AN OUTLIER

An excerpt from
I Bring the Voices
of My People:
A Womanist Vision for
Racial Reconciliation,
by Chanequa Walker-Barnes

Eerdmans



“Why am I here?” The question echoed in my head as it had on countless prior occasions. It seems that I cannot participate in a meeting or conference about Christian community development, social justice, or racial reconciliation without the question emerging at least once. As an African American woman, I am frequently reminded that these spaces are not my home. I am an outlier: I am neither White nor male, and I don’t fit neatly into any of the typical Protestant boxes. I am too evangelical to be mainline, too mainline to be fully historical Black church, and too historical Black church to be evangelical. Sometimes I even feel too interfaith to be Christian. I am often alone in a room full of people—the only woman of color and even the only African American woman. The conversations in these spaces are often overtly patriarchal, dismissing women’s experiences and expertise. These groups think diversity is achieved if they include men of color and White women, both of whom make pronouncements about race and gender that are assumed to capture everyone’s experiences but that exclude those of women of color. I am often forced into the position of being the “Yes, but” voice. It is soul-wearying. And yet I—we—stay.

In the past two decades, racial reconciliation has emerged as an increasingly popular topic of academic discourse in the United States and South Africa. An inherently practical discipline, the field of reconciliation studies was birthed out of the experiences of evangelical Christian ministers and laypersons whose quotidian experiences crossed traditional boundaries of race and ethnicity within the church. In the United States, the racial reconciliation movement has strong roots in evangelical church and parachurch organizations. However, because of the emphasis upon male headship and female submission among evangelicals, men have dominated the movement and the literature.

In the United States, consequently, reconciliation has been largely framed as a movement aimed at obliterating racial barriers between African American and White men. With few exceptions, women’s voices and perspectives are largely absent. The result of this exclusively male gaze is a body of literature that examines race as a singular construct, ignoring the intersections between race, gender, and sexuality.

**IT IS SOUL-
WEARYING.
AND YET
WE STAY.**

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BORDERLANDS

By Kristin Berkey-Abbott



I am the border agent who looks
the other way. I am the one
who leaves bottled water in caches
in the harsh borderlands I patrol.

I am the one who doesn't shoot.
I let the people assemble,
with their flickering candles a shimmering
river in the dark. "Let them pray,"
I tell my comrades. "What harm
can come of that?" We holster
our guns and open a bottle to share.

I am the superior
officer who loses the paperwork
or makes up the statistics.
I am the one who ignores
your emails, who cannot be reached
by text or phone, the one
with a full inbox.

When the wise ones
come, as they do, full of dreams,
babbling about the stars
that lead them or messages
from gods or angels,
I open the gates. I don't alert
the authorities up the road.
Let the kings and emperors
pay for their own intelligence.

I should scan the horizons,
but I tend the garden
I have planted by the shed
where we keep the extra
barbed wire. I grow a variety
of holy trinities: tomatoes, onions,
peppers, beans, squashes of all sorts.
I plant a hedge of sunflowers,
each bright head a north star.

Kristin Berkey-Abbott, author of *Life in the Holocene Extinction*, lives in
Hollywood, Fla.

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SOJOURNERS

A THRILL OF HOPE IN A WEARY WORLD

Scripture passages
are from the Revised
Common Lectionary,
Cycle A.

By M. Daniel Carroll R.



Living the Word

Christmas offers an opportunity to reflect on how well we know Jesus as he would want to be known. Can we be the kind of Jesus followers we should be without an adequate

understanding of who Jesus really is? Only a good grasp of who Jesus is offers a solid foundation for our worship and service in the new year.

For many, this Christmas Jesus is a beautiful baby boy wrapped in swaddling clothes, sleeping in a trough on a bed of straw, as farm animals and shepherds look on pensively. Another common scene of tranquility is one of the baby Jesus in the arms of his mother Mary—the Madonna and child portrait so prominent throughout church history. In many ways, these depictions are appropriate for the Christmas season, but there is a potential problem. For many, these are the *defining* images of Jesus: helpless, dependent, silent.

This is not at all the person of the Messiah who is announced in the Old Testament. What was the expectation that gripped the Jewish people for centuries? What was the Coming One to do? How would he change the world as they knew it? How can he change the world as we know it?

These readings explore prophetic passages that describe the One who was to come. How does the New Testament celebrate Jesus as that long-expected Messiah? How can his coming help us to live out our faith well?

M. Daniel Carroll R., a member of the steering committee of the Hispanic Theological Initiative, is Blanchard Professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College in Illinois.

TRUST GOD, EVEN IN THE FACE OF OPPOSITION.

JANUARY 5

A MIGRATORY PEOPLE

JEREMIAH 31:7-14; PSALM 147:12-20;

EPHESIANS 1:3-14; JOHN 1:1-18

Words of hope arise in response to human need and suffering. These needs vary, according to circumstances. In parts of the world today, life is overwhelmed by terrible violence. Other places experience ecological disaster and a lack of food and water. Survival is what the unfortunate long for, a different future for themselves and their families. So, people try to migrate to a new place. These factors are not new; the history of humanity is the history of migration to escape unrelenting misery. Today, the numbers of displaced people are in the many millions.

Centuries ago, God's people experienced a crushing war. Jerusalem was destroyed, thousands died, and thousands were taken away to Babylon. Amid terrible defeat, Jeremiah announced that one day they would come home! YHWH, their father, shepherd, and redeemer (Jeremiah 31:10-11), would bring them back, comfort them, and provide all they desired. God would turn their weeping into indescribable joy (verses 12-14). In ancient times, a nation's defeat meant the defeat of their god. God's people cannot be deceived by that lie. YHWH reigns supreme. God will bend history on their behalf, even if everything around seems to say that God cannot.

This concrete prophetic word still rings true. Our God cares about the harsh realities endured by the hopeless, those victims of wars, drug violence, and climate change who swarm to other lands seeking respite

and a new start. To those migrants this word brings comfort, to others it ignites a call to mission to make a tangible difference in the life of others.

But there is more. Hope comes through the One who is life and the light of the world (John 1:1-18). Through this Jesus, God incarnate, we can become God's children, which also means we are redeemed and receive the promised Holy Spirit. All of this is for the praise of God's glory (Ephesians 1:3-14). Here lies hope beyond despair.

JANUARY 12

SERVANTS TO JUSTICE

ISAIAH 42:1-9; PSALM 29;

ACTS 10:34-43; MATTHEW 3:13-17

Epiphany, celebrated on Jan. 6, commemorates the revelation of the Incarnate One to the Magi. There are several other important revelations of Jesus' deity in the gospels. One occurs at his baptism by John in the Jordan (Matthew 3:13-17). The text tells us that the heavens opened and that a voice declared, "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." In addition to the appearance of the Holy Spirit in the form of the dove, there is a key detail not to miss: the phrase "with whom I am well pleased."

These words and the presence of the Spirit echo Isaiah 42:1. This prophetic passage (42:1-9) is the first of several that announce God's coming Servant. Note that in the opening verses, "justice" occurs three times. To establish justice on the earth is the essence of this Servant's mission! This is the new thing that YHWH will bring to pass. In the world we live in, this seems like an impossible dream.

But, at Jesus' baptism, God announces that the Servant has come. The mission of that Servant, Jesus, to bring justice has begun. The disciples testify to Jesus' works in the Spirit (Acts 10:34-43): preaching the good news of peace, doing good, and healing the sick. This Servant's ministry was bound up with his death, but it is this Crucified One who will one day judge humanity.

In this in-between time, between the cross and Jesus' coming again, does it seem like all our efforts at justice are hopeless, our faith a delusion? We need to see that our involvements—whatever they may be—in immigration reform, the care of the homeless, drug rehabilitation, and so

much more, testify to Jesus no matter the appearances. Like those first disciples, with the help of the Spirit we carry out the mission of the Crucified One to give our life for the world.

JANUARY 19

SEEING RIGHTLY

ISAIAH 49:1-7; PSALM 40:1-11;

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-9; JOHN 1:29-42

Can we see the world rightly? If I take off my glasses, everything is blurred. I see, but not clearly. I need those glasses to see the world as it really is. The scripture is the lens for our lives, and only with those glasses can we understand that we are called to an upside-down kingdom.

Isaiah describes a Servant who is Israel (49:3), but who ministers *to* Israel and *beyond* Israel as light for all nations (verses 5-6). Great suffering will be part of the Servant's calling (verses 4, 7). God's Servant will be despised by everyone and then honored before the powerful (verse 7). But wait, rulers do not bow to servants! How does this work? This is the Servant's good news of a different kingdom. Honor comes in serving the world.

In John's gospel these confusing statements begin to make sense. John shows that Jesus embodies all that Israel was meant to be as God's Servant. Jesus came to minister to Israel and to redeem all humanity as the Lamb of God (John 1:29-37). In Jesus, the hope of Isaiah 49 has come. There is more. Isaiah 49:4 speaks of the Servant's deep trust in God no matter how hard the circumstances. Psalm 40 calls us to confidence in God's mercy, steadfast love, and faithfulness. Now, as God sustains us, with our gifts we serve this Jesus—Servant, Lord, and Lamb—until Christ is revealed again (1 Corinthians 1:1-9).

In a culture where winning is everything, where people we disagree with are vilified, and where so many seek attention

in the media, the Servant shows us another way. Honor before God, and eventually the powerful, comes in serving the world. This upside-down way of the Servant is not easy. We must trust God even when we face opposition.

JANUARY 26

BRIGHT LIGHT AHEAD

ISAIAH 9:1-4; PSALM 27:1, 4-9;

1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-18; MATTHEW 4:12-23

Our world is fascinated by death and darkness. Look at the wars around the globe, the violence against many who are vulnerable, the ugliness of our politics. We even embrace this darkness vicariously in video games and movies. This is what humans do.

The hope of Isaiah 9:1-7 is announced at a time when Israel had chosen darkness (8:16-22). A "great light" will come through an amazing royal child, a Davidic king who will establish justice. But that hope is not limited to the future. God is our light and salvation now (Psalm 27:1). When we are in difficult circumstances, we know that in God there is protection (verses 4-6). God beckons us to seek the help and assurance that we so desperately desire (29:7-9).

In a terrible moment in his ministry—John had been arrested and would soon be executed—Jesus turns to Isaiah 9 (Matthew 4:12-16). What days of darkness! But the light had come; Jesus was that light, calling everyone to repent and to turn to the light. There is a lesson here: Those who have come to the light—to Jesus—can trust in the salvation and support of the God of light, and this privilege brings with it the responsibility to announce the good news.

Fulfilling this mission well is a challenge. We may leave our former lives behind to follow Jesus (Matthew 4:18-22), and even witness the wonders that Jesus performs (verse 23). But all of us know that division can raise its ugly head even among Christians (1 Corinthians 1:10-16). Again, we must choose the light over the ways of the world. The light of Jesus must illumine every area of our lives. ✱

DO OUR INVOLVEMENTS TESTIFY TO JESUS?

"Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for Bible study and sermon preparation, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

H'rumps



AN AFTERNOON AT THE MUSEUM

By Ed Spivey Jr.

One of the advantages of living in our nation's capital is visiting world class museums at no charge. It's your tax dollars at work, particularly for residents, and we don't have to wash cars and sell wrapping paper for the school band to get here. Nor do we walk in groups wearing matching shirts with beleaguered adults anxiously counting heads and hoping to get back on the bus with the same number that got off, give or take.

Bless their hearts, these impressionable young people, choosing to spend their vacations in the fetid swamp of Washington, D.C., despite their parents' fearful warnings. They move in self-conscious clusters, drinking our water despite the intestinal risks endemic to foreign lands and unaware of the local swamp creatures like myself slithering around them. We would be invisible but for our anachronistic clothing that does not say "[name of school] ROCKS!"

The most popular of all museums these days is the Museum of Natural History, with its redesigned dinosaur exhibit tracing life on Earth back to its very beginning. I was awed during my recent visit, and not just by my newfound agility to dodge double strollers blocking the bathrooms. The interactive displays are stunning, with state-of-the-art technology that brings ancient epochs to life. So absorbing were the graphics that it took me several minutes staring at one fascinating display before I realized it was a thermostat.

The museum is brimming with archaeological concepts that are new to me, probably because they weren't on television when I was a kid. (If it wasn't on *Gilligan's Island*, how

HEY, WAIT. WHERE'S THE BIBLE SCIENCE STUFF?

could I know about it?) For example, did you know there were multiple extinction events in the Earth's history? I thought the meteor that crashed off the coastline of Mexico was the only one, given that it killed off the dinosaurs and left only small mammals, hardier flora, and one flavor of Doritos to evolve in the darkness. But five other catastrophic events altered the life of this planet. (Six, if you count the intellectual extinction Fox News has inflicted upon of millions of Americans.)

Surprisingly, two important evolutionary theories were *not* included in the exhibit. One is that humans lived alongside dinosaurs, a notion insisted on by biblical literalists who believe the Earth is only a few thousand years old. The dinosaur bones assembled in realistic scenarios were impressive, but would have been more theologically sound had they included human skeletons nearby. The humans could have been posed using dinosaurs as gentle beasts of burden or even as domesticated pets for their children. The humans would be eaten, of course, but who said Bible science would be pretty? (Another lost opportunity: A pair of triceratops watching a departing Noah's Ark. So sad.)

The second theory the Smithsonian somehow ignored—my personal favorite, although Darwin died before he could confirm it—is that an ancient race of aliens planted its DNA in the fertile protoplasm of a young Earth. Rudy Giuliani emerged as an early result of that experiment, rising from the muck of antediluvian Africa. But when the prototype exhibited few recognizable human characteristics, it was ordered deactivated and used for spare parts.

Somehow it survived, eventually mutating into various subspecies of Kardashians and "Dancing with the Stars" contestants, which continue to confound archaeologists to this day.

So sad. ❖

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of *Sojourners* magazine.

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